Schools as Centers of Community Improve Learning

Many recent documents support the concept that schools are centers of community. Research shows that this concept boosts student achievement and focuses community life. Some reports also advocate the fiscal soundness of the concept and others point to the environmental advantages of land use. A 2003 evaluation of 20 community school initiatives across the United States yielded the following findings about schools that function as centers of community:

- Improved student academic performance
- Improved attendance
- Improved graduation rates
- Reduced dropout rates
- Reduced behavioral/discipline problems
- Increased access to physical and mental health services [1, 2]

Here are reasons to consider building schools that function as centers of community:

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) views schools as the key to promoting economic development, strengthening neighborhoods, and improving human and environmental health.[3]
- According to the EPA, a centrally located school with sidewalks and safe walking and biking routes can reduce air pollution and promote other healthy community benefits, such as joint-use arrangements.[4, 5]

- Schools that function as centers of community may be open late or longer for community use—or they may have been designed to provide the community with other services, such as a public library, performing arts center, fine arts center, senior center, health clinic, community college branch, sports stadium, public park, or museum.[6, 7]
- Co-location is a concept according to which public services are placed together in one location. The benefits are cost savings and community support for the tax increases required to repay school construction bonds.[8, 9]
- Many perceived obstacles to joint use can be overcome with agreements between agency groups that typically function in "silos." The cost benefits to communities can be substantial.[10, 11]

Notes

1. Martin Blank, Atelia Melaville, and Bela P. Shah, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership, 2003).
2. Joy G. Dryfoos, *Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to Date* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, 2000).
3. Council of Educational Facility Planners International, *Schools for Successful Communities: An Element of Smart Growth* (Scottsdale, AZ, 2004).
4. Ibid.
5. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting* (Washington, DC, 2003).
6. See note 3.
7. Maryland Department of Planning, "Managing Maryland's Growth: Smart Growth, Community Planning and Public School Construction," *Models & Guidelines* 27 (July 2008).
8. Ibid.
9. Mary Filardo and others, *Joint Use of Public Schools: A Framework for a New Social Contract* (Washington, DC: 21st Century School Fund, 2010).
10. National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity, *Opening School Property After Hours: A Primer on Liability* (Oakland, CA, 2010).
11. Jeffrey M.Vincent, *Partnerships for Joint Use: Expanding the Use of Public School Infrastructure to Benefit Students and Communities* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Cities and Schools, 2010).

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