

Why Johnny Can't Walk to School



*The small school you could walk to is being replaced by mega-schools
in remote locations. The historic Wilson School in Spokane, Washington,
has served three generations and anchors an older neighborhood.
The school's location permits children to walk to school.*



HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL:

Why Johnny Can't Walk to School

AN IMPORTANT PART OF AMERICA—THE SMALL SCHOOL YOU COULD WALK TO IN A NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE YOU KNEW YOUR NEIGHBORS—is disappearing. It's being replaced by mega-school sprawl—giant educational facilities in remote, middle-of-nowhere locations that no child can walk to.

Across the country, parents and teachers are clamoring for smaller, community-centered schools on the basis that they are better for kids and better for learning. Many historic neighborhood schools fit precisely that description and could be renovated to meet state-of-the-art technology, code, and educational program standards if given a chance. But this potential for renovation is often dismissed, as is the negative impact of boarded-up schools on older neighborhoods.

Handsome school buildings that once inspired civic pride are being discarded for nondescript, “big box” schools. Acres of asphalt are replacing close-knit, walkable neighborhoods as the typical school setting. Schools that have anchored in-town neighborhoods for generations are biting the dust.

Increasingly, a stressful drive through congested traffic separates parents and children from ever more distant schools. Sprawl—the randomly scattered, haphazard development

taking over the American countryside—has made our environment so inhospitable to pedestrians that only one in eight children walks or bikes to school today.

This report looks at how some public policies are contributing to these problems and at what citizens and public officials are doing to solve them. It ends with an *Agenda for Change*—recommendations for public policy reforms.

Public Policies that Undermine Historic Neighborhood Schools

HUGE ACREAGE STANDARDS for schools and conflicts between smart growth planning and school facility planning top the list of public policy “culprits” for the demise of historic neighborhood schools.



Acreage Standards

STATE EDUCATION AND LOCAL ZONING DEPARTMENTS set acreage standards for schools that are difficult to meet in established neighborhoods. Standards recommended by many states and localities range from ten to sixty acres for schools. Older schools typically occupy only two to eight acres. To satisfy the standards, school districts must often destroy nearby homes, parks and neighborhoods, or they must move to “sprawl locations” in outlying areas. These areas are usually too remote for students to walk to or reach by public transit and are accessible only by cars or school buses, which in turn require vast expanses of asphalt for parking.

It's hard to have community-centered schools when acreage requirements force schools away from the center of the community. This is a major reason why “Johnny” (and “Jane”) can no longer walk to school—or anywhere else.

Conflicts between Smart Growth Planning and School Facility Planning

“THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM is the most influential planning entity, public or private, promoting the sprawl pattern of development in America,” writes W. Cecil Steward, dean of the University of Nebraska's College

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL:

Historic school renovation costs are often exaggerated.

For one \$4-million Indiana project, the cost of bringing the building up to code had been overestimated by \$16 million!

of Architecture, in an article describing school districts as “advance scouts for sprawl.” Citizens from Georgia to California have complained that school districts often ignore local comprehensive plans intended to promote orderly growth and protect the economic viability of established communities. Following the build-it-and-they-will-come principle, school districts are creating beachheads for new residential sprawl while breaking up farmland and making it harder for older neighborhoods to attract and retain families.

A Thicket of Other Factors

RUNNING CLOSE BEHIND ACREAGE standards and uncoordinated planning as causes of the abandonment of historic neighborhood schools is a thicket of other factors:

- ❖ **State funding biases.** State policies can favor building new schools over upgrading existing ones. Ohio, for example, says that if the cost of renovating a school exceeds two-thirds of the cost of building a new one, the school district should build new. The problem with such a rule is that it doesn’t consider hidden costs paid by state or local governments. For example, the costs of water and sewer line extensions, student transportation, and road work necessary to serve a new school in an outlying area may be ignored. In fact, renovation is often less expensive than new construction.
- ❖ **Inflated school renovation cost estimates.** Because many school boards and architects advising them are unfamiliar with, or biased against, renovation options, cost estimates for school renovations are often inflated. In Kokomo, Ind., the cost of bringing a historic high school up to code was overestimated by a full \$16 million. The school was eventually renovated for only \$4 million, but only because a local school board member who happened to have a professional background in fire safety questioned the inflated estimates. More often, such estimates go unchallenged.
- ❖ **Building codes inflexibly applied.** Modern building codes are written with new construction methods and materials in mind. Since the codes are updated every few years, most existing buildings, even recent ones, do not comply with every code provision. This does not mean the buildings are unsafe. The addition of smoke detectors and other early warning systems can compensate for items required by modern codes. The overly rigid application of modern codes, and the failure to consider code compliance alternatives, can rule out otherwise viable renovation options.
- ❖ **Deferred maintenance.** School districts often feel pressured to use money for building maintenance for other pressing needs—new computers, teacher salaries, supplies, etc. In New York, a state comptroller report identified “a built-in fiscal incentive to avoid prudent maintenance expenditures, and instead let physical structures deteriorate until replacement is the only real option.” It’s not age, but lack of care, that undermines an older school building.
- ❖ **Acceptance of donated sites.** Developers sometimes donate land for schools in an effort to improve the value of new subdivisions or to win local government approval of large commercial projects in “sprawl locations.” The land thus donated is not always the best location for a school.

It is hard to quantify in dollars and cents the value of the community pride associated with a historic school, such as Lincoln High School in Manitowoc, Wis. More than 3,000 people showed up to celebrate the school's reopening after it was renovated to meet new technology and other standards.



*This is the renovated Bosse High School, Evansville, Ind.
The Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation has emphasized good stewardship
through its maintenance and renovation of older schools.*



HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL:

*"If an older building is equated with poor education,
why would anyone want to send a child
to an Ivy League school?"*

—Resident of Two Rivers, Wisconsin

❖ **Withholding of information.** Although many school boards are models of inclusiveness and openness, others fail to provide important information to the public. In Thomas, Okla., a recently approved school bond said nothing about the school board's intention to demolish the town's historic high school. Local citizens are protesting this decision. In Clear Creek County, Colo., voters recently approved another school bond, but the bond referendum said nothing about the proposed location of a new high school. Area residents fear the new school's location may hurt existing communities.

❖ **Biased school facility planning committees.** If the committees that plan new schools are dominated by corporations, developers, construction company owners or others biased in favor of building new schools in outlying areas, advocates of upgrading existing, in-town schools face an uphill battle. Citizens in Corning, N.Y., Billings, Mont., Bloomer, Wis., and elsewhere have raised this issue as a major problem.

Communities and Public Officials are Fighting Back

RECOGNIZING THAT THE CLOSURE of a long-standing school can have devastating consequences for established neighborhoods, citizens in many areas of the country are starting to fight back.

❖ **In Durham, N.C.,** when the application of state acreage and other standards threatened the historic Watts Elementary School, neighborhood residents mounted an all-out campaign to save and renovate this small, community-centered school. They succeeded in the end, but it took hours of volunteer time and the production of a feasibility study to refute assertions that the school's renovation was infeasible.

❖ **In New Castle, Pa.,** residents of the North Hills Historic District have gathered more than 2,000 signatures on a petition asking the school district to abandon its plan to demolish a 1910 high school and 13 historic homes in the surrounding neighborhood. Because the school is one of the city's most important landmarks, city residents would like school renovation options more seriously considered before the school and homes are destroyed.

❖ **In Rice Lake, Wis.,** a "Save Our Schools" committee has formed to save three historic elementary schools. In urging the school district to save these schools, citizens have pointed out that, if they are closed, students who now walk to school would have to be bused to outlying locations at a cost to taxpayers of several thousands of dollars annually.

❖ **In Charlevoix, Mich.,** local residents have sued the school district over plans to build a high school on 74 acres of prime farmland three miles out of town. Fearing that a new sewer line running out to the school will stimulate sprawl development, the residents had advocated rebuilding an existing school in an in-town neighborhood.

Residents of Two Rivers, Wis., lost their battle to save the old Washington High School. In fighting, however, they raised an important question: If an older building is equated with a poor education, why would anyone want to send a child to an Ivy League college? Or to Oxford or Cambridge Universities, two venerable institutions that offer world-class educational experiences in centuries-old buildings located in the heart of old cities?

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL:

*"They have recycling bins in the cafeteria,
and yet they were planning to cart
the whole school off to the landfill."*

—North Carolina parent Dan Becker

Better Models for School Facility Policies

DESPITE THESE PROBLEMS, progressive policies adopted by a handful of states offer hope for change.

- ❖ **Maryland** has chosen to scrap school acreage requirements. The state believes that school site decisions should be left to the community and be based on its educational program requirements. Under the state's "smart growth" program, Maryland actually gives preference to reinvestment in existing schools over new school construction in sprawl locations.
- ❖ **Maine** promotes better coordination between general community planning and school facility planning. The state planning office and board of education have jointly published a brochure urging school districts to avoid sprawl, renovate existing schools in town centers, and promote walking to school.
- ❖ **New Jersey** has adopted a special Rehabilitation Code that makes it easier, and less costly, to renovate historic buildings, schools included, while still ensuring safety.

- ❖ **Pennsylvania** has eliminated a rule that prevented communities from renovating existing schools if the costs of renovation exceeded 60% of new school construction costs. Pennsylvania also eliminated a policy that forbade multi-level schools made with wood frame construction when such schools adopt compensatory measures to provide a measure of life safety equivalent to that in modern buildings.

- ❖ **Massachusetts** has adopted financial incentives that reward school districts for excellence in maintaining existing schools and for renovating schools.

- ❖ **Washington** discourages deferred maintenance and neglect of existing school buildings.



- ❖ **In California**, new legislation has been introduced to require school districts to pay more attention to local zoning policies. Current law permits the districts to exempt themselves from zoning rules through a two-thirds vote of the school board.

School Renovation Successes

NOT EVERY HISTORIC neighborhood school can or even should be saved, but many such schools can be, and have been, renovated to meet modern life safety, handicapped accessibility, computer technology and educational program needs. Creative architects experienced in building rehabilitation techniques can knock down walls to change the size of classrooms. They can install ramps and elevators to improve the accessibility of a building. They can add sprinklers and exits to enhance life safety. They can add skylights to cheer up a dark room. And school officials can reach agreements with city park agencies, nearby churches, public transit agencies and other institutions to share playing fields, parking spaces, transportation services and other things that schools need.

This house in New Castle, Pa., may be headed for the landfill along with twelve others and the historic 1910 high school. Residents have gathered more than 2,000 petition signatures in protest.



One finds eloquent rebuttals to the all-too-common view that new-is-always-better and old-is-always-bad in places from Spokane, Wash. to Miami, Florida, where historic schools have been upgraded to meet state-of-the-art standards. The benefits of these projects are many.

- ❖ **Students can be more independent** and not require their parents to drive them everywhere they go.
- ❖ **Students can participate** more easily in work-study and service-learning programs.
- ❖ **Neighborhoods can retain the anchors** that have served them for generations and brought residents together.
- ❖ **Parents can be more involved** in their children's school activities.
- ❖ **Cohesive neighborhoods can be preserved** and provide the "village that it takes to raise a child."
- ❖ **Students can receive personal attention** and an excellent education in these often-smaller schools, which may engender local pride.

*Only one in eight children walks to school today,
in part because huge acreage standards dictate that schools be built in outlying areas
where land is plentiful. Student transportation costs have risen
dramatically as “school sprawl” has proliferated.*



HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL:

"...The school is one of the few structures that really brings us together and gives us a sense of ownership over the neighborhood.

It's the most cohesive element we have as a community."

—Curtis Eshelman, Durham, N.C.

In Manitowoc, Wis., this reaction of the public to the open-house celebration of the Lincoln High School's renovation underscores the value of historic neighborhood schools to many communities. "It was unbelievable how many people attended this event," says Joan Graff, a public information specialist for the Manitowoc Public School District. "People who had attended the school 60, 70 years ago—elderly people—came to this event. People were smiling. It was wonderful. Students had prepared food for 3,000 people, but so many people showed up that they ran out. Several generations of students have attended Lincoln, so the community feels a real sense of loyalty to the school."

"The school is viewed as the cornerstone of the neighborhood," says Darrell Rud, a school principal in Billings, Mont., and president-elect of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. "The school symbolizes the neighborhood. You take out the school, and it's the beginning of the decline of the neighborhood. You've got to have a school to have a neighborhood."

It's Time to Change the Rules

AS CURTIS Eshelman, a former school board member who worked to save Durham, N.C.'s historic Watts Elementary School, put it, "When you think about it, the school is one of the few structures that really brings us together and gives us a sense of ownership over the neighborhood. It's the most cohesive element we have as a community."

Like the movement of post offices and other public buildings from downtowns to outlying commercial strips, the migration of schools from settled neighborhoods to remote locations is one more factor weakening the ties that once brought people together. Like residential or commercial sprawl, "school sprawl" is

contributing to the dismemberment of communities around the country.

If it's time to bring back smaller, community-centered schools, as many parents and educators are saying, it's also time to stop destroying such schools where they already exist. It's time to stop dismissing creative renovation options so quickly. It's time to give kids the option of walking to school. It's time to preserve—and upgrade, when necessary—older schools whose architecture inspires civic pride.

In short, it's time to change public policies that promote school sprawl and undermine the efforts of citizens to save the small, community-centered schools in historic neighborhoods that mean so much to them.



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HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF SPRAWL:

Agenda for Change: Public Policy Recommendations

1 Put historic neighborhood schools on a level playing field with new schools. Eliminate funding biases that favor new construction over renovation and maintenance.

2 Eliminate arbitrary acreage standards that undermine the ability of established communities to retain and upgrade (or replace on the same site, when necessary) historic and older schools that could continue to serve as centers of community.

3 Avoid “mega-school sprawl”—massive schools in remote locations that stimulate sprawl development and are accessible only by car or bus.

4 Develop procedures for accepting land donated by developers for new schools. Land in “sprawl locations” that are inappropriate for schools should be rejected.

5 Encourage school districts to cooperate with other institutions—e.g., government agencies, nonprofits, churches, and private businesses—

to share playgrounds, ball fields, and parking as well as to provide transit services, when appropriate.

6 Establish guidelines, training programs, and funding mechanisms to ensure adequate school building maintenance. Create disincentives for school districts to defer needed maintenance and allow buildings to fall into disrepair.

7 Require feasibility studies comparing the costs of new schools with those of renovating existing schools before new schools are built and existing ones abandoned. Use architects with experience in rehabilitation to conduct such studies.

8 Reexamine exemptions given to local school districts from local planning, zoning, and growth management laws.

9 Work to ensure that a minimum of 50% of the students can walk or bike to school in cities, towns, and suburbs. Promote safe-routes-to-school legislation in the states.

10 When a historic school cannot be preserved and reused, school districts and/or local government should implement plans for the building’s adaptive use or replacement so that it does not become a source of blight in the neighborhood.

11 Promote “smart codes” legislation to encourage the rehabilitation and modernization of historic schools as well as other still serviceable buildings.

12 Provide education and training in school renovation techniques and options for school facility planners, contractors, private consultants, architects, school board members, municipal officials and others.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is pleased to report that the Council of Educational Facility Planners International is considering updating its model guidelines, which are adopted by many states, to make the renovation of existing schools in established neighborhoods more feasible.

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