

## Smarter Planning For Schools and Communities

By Ellen Shoshkes, Ph.D.

*Last year New Jersey launched the largest, most comprehensive school construction program in the nation. On July 18, 2000, former Gov. Christine Todd Whitman signed the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act into law. This program presents New Jersey residents with an unprecedented opportunity to leverage capital spending on school facilities to stimulate broader community development.*

To raise public awareness about this, the New Jersey Office of State Planning (OSP) initiated the Communities of Learners Campaign. This initiative aims to stimulate a statewide conversation with the public, including public officials, on how to create an expanded vision of public schools for New Jersey communities.

This *PAS Memo* provides background on New Jersey's school construction program and describes six principles for planning and designing schools that can serve as centers of community. These principles, which are being promoted through the OSP's Communities of Learners Campaign, may serve as models to be replicated elsewhere.

### School Construction and Finance in New Jersey

New Jersey's school construction program has its origins in the state supreme court's May 1998 ruling in *Abbott v. Burke*. The court directed the state to provide facilities for public school children in the 30 Abbott school districts "that will be sufficient to enable these students to achieve the substantive standards that now define a thorough and efficient education and the quality of the facilities cannot depend on the district's willingness or ability to raise taxes or to incur debt."

After nearly two years of debate, the legislature enacted the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, which provides for an expanded schools construction program, including aid, for all 618 school districts in the state. The state will pay for this \$12 billion effort by raising \$8.6 billion through bond issues and financing the rest through local districts and other annual appropriations of the state legislature. This law fundamentally restructures how public school facilities projects are planned, managed, and financed in New Jersey.

In addition to the construction program, the court ordered the implementation of "whole school reform" in all elementary schools in the Abbott districts. Whole school reform involves a systematic restructuring of an entire school, engaging the participation of the faculty, administration, students, parents, and other community stakeholders. According to a background paper from the New Jersey Department of Education on the Abbott districts, this "must be implemented as interrelated parts of a comprehensive program." The wide consensus about the effectiveness of whole school reform is closely aligned with the consensus forming around the concept of community-centered schools.



Ellen Shoshkes

*A Trenton resident comments on a proposed school site, at the former Magic Marker factory.*

According to a publication from the U.S. Department of Education, there are two ways a school can serve as a center of community, "either by serving a more integral role within the context of the whole community, or by extending the learning environment to take advantage of the full range of the

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community's resources. Indeed, the most successful schools of the future will be integrated learning communities, which accommodate the needs of all of the community's stakeholders." Either way, the concept of schools that serve as centers of communities represents a key strategy for supporting the revitalization of existing cities and towns and encouraging compact growth patterns in suburbs, both goals of New Jersey's State Development and Redevelopment Plan.

In August 2000 Jane Kenny, Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA), announced the set-aside of funds from the Smart Growth Planning Grant program to create the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program to encourage school districts and municipalities to coordinate planning for new school facilities with inclusive neighborhood planning.

### **Community Schools: Planning and Design Considerations**

Community schools have their origins in John Dewey's pioneering work at the University of Chicago on child-centered, learning-by-doing education approaches. His work formed a significant strand within the Progressive Reform movement of the late 19th century, a time when progressives hoped to use *design* as a lever to reform society.

By the mid-20th century, however, trends toward specialization resulted in a growing separation between schools and their communities and between architects and planners, aesthetic and social concerns, and among the units of government responsible for housing, education, health, transportation, and economic development policies and programs. The current community schools movement is part of an international trend. A number of foundations, organizations, and institutions have become increasingly focused on finding ways to strengthen families and nurture healthier communities.

The emerging bipartisan consensus in the U.S. on national education policy and livable communities reflects this trend. The current administration endorses a set of national design principles generated in October 1998 at "Design of Schools as Centers of Community," a forum convened by the U.S. Department of Education. These principles have been published by the department in *Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizens Guide to Planning and Design*. The six design principles it offers provide a framework for investigation of the new issues and problems that might arise in realizing alternative visions. To meet the nation's needs for the 21st century, learning environments must:

1. Enhance teaching and learning and accommodate the needs of all learners.
2. Serve as centers of the community.
3. Result from a planning/design process involving all stakeholders.
4. Provide for health, safety, and security.
5. Make effective use of all available resources.
6. Allow for flexibility and adapt to changing needs.

The following section describes these principles, with examples of how they are being achieved in New Jersey and encouraged with the support of the DCA's Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program.

*Enhance teaching and learning and accommodate the needs of all learners.* Although there are many theories about how to enhance teaching and learning, and many new ideas about what constitutes an effective learning environment, there seems to be "an emerging consensus that smaller size is an essential condition of an effective school," says Jeanne Frankel in *New Schools for New York*. There are several strategies for creating smaller learning environments in existing large schools, including limiting class size and subdividing into smaller units within existing schools. Bayonne High School, which has 2,050 students in grades 9-12, offers a good example of how subdivision works. Each student is assigned to one of five heterogeneous "houses." They benefit from the intimacy of a small cohort and still have access to the programs, facilities, and resources of a large institution.

Where new construction is an option, one strategy is to cap overall school size. Charter schools are a good model of small schools that meet contemporary criteria for an effective learning environment and are integrated with their communities. They have had to be innovative in order to live within frugal facilities budgets. For example, students enrolled at the Hoboken Charter School walk a few blocks to the local YMCA for their gym classes.

The Center for Innovative Education at the Public Education Association, a New York City-based policy analysis and advocacy group, developed the concept of urban academies to replicate the success of charter schools. This concept is being implemented in Paterson, New Jersey, one of the Abbott districts. Under the direction of Superintendent of Schools Edwin Duroy, the Paterson Board of Education is creating seven career-based academies, which offer specialized curricula and smaller classes in sites scattered throughout the downtown.

Duroy enlisted the help of Roy Strickland, at the time an architecture professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to help find sites for these academies. Strickland's team created the City of Learning plan, which recommends that Paterson use its social, economic, and physical resources, and those of the surrounding region, for learning by children and adults; leverage learning and technology for economic development; see schools as multi-use centers for neighborhood revitalization; and empower its residents to become technologists, conservationists, planners, and entrepreneurs while they learn.

In Paterson, a former mill town, vacant land is scarce but vacant buildings are plentiful. The Academy of Fine Arts now occupies the former St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, while an academy for international studies and languages is located in an old synagogue. The second floor of a downtown shopping plaza houses the Health and Related Professions Academy (HARP), and the Metro Paterson Academy for Communications and Technology (MPACT), which is focused on urban planning and design.

Both charter schools and Paterson's urban academies are the right scale for experimentation—both had to find affordable spaces and were able to fit into what was available. Unlike charter schools, however, Duroy's urban academies are eligible for state support through the new construction program. With the help of a Communities Schools Smart Growth Grant, the City of Trenton and the Trenton Board of Education have

hired Roy Strickland, in partnership with ICON Architects and Planners, to develop a City of Learning plan for four new schools in Trenton with its share of the Abbott funds.

**Serve as centers of the community.** As defined by the Coalition for Community Schools, a national organization dedicated to the community school movement, "a community school is both a set of partnerships and a place where services, supports, and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities." To achieve these goals, most community schools work to link educational and cultural programs, recreation, job training, community improvement, and service activities. These activities may be housed in a single building, a cluster of adjacent facilities, or a network of sites, such as the City of Learning design concept.

There is substantial institutional support for community schools in New Jersey, through the School Based Youth Services Program (SBYSP). Developed in 1987 by the state Department of Human Services, SBYSP gives grants to community agencies to link education, human services, health, and employment systems. Schools and community agency partners in 30 school districts have undertaken this "one-stop" program. Each site provides health care, mental health and family counseling, job and employment training, and substance abuse counseling. Many sites provide additional services, including teen parenting education, day care, transportation, tutoring, family planning, and hotlines. Programs operate before, during, and after school, and during the summer; some are open on weekends.

In 1997 the Board of Education established its first school-based services project at Stillman Elementary School in Plainfield. This served as the basis for a district-wide plan, Plainfield's Promise, based on the nationwide initiative America's Promise, a comprehensive service delivery initiative to revolutionize how school-based and community-based services are delivered to at-risk youth and their families. Superintendent of Schools Larry Leverett believes that every school in Plainfield should have a health center and aims to leverage Abbott funds totaling \$185 million to realize that vision.

**Result from a planning/design process involving all stakeholders.** In crafting the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, New Jersey lawmakers recognized that the location of school facilities is important to both the educational success of the schools and the development of the communities they serve. They agreed that it makes sense, where possible, to integrate the planning and construction of schools into the economic and community development efforts of local governments and community redevelopment entities in order to promote more effective and efficient use of land, resources, and expertise, and to better assure the future viability of local neighborhoods and communities, especially in urban areas.

Municipal governments have a crucial leadership function to play in harmonizing school facility and municipal master plans. This effort should focus on incorporating neighborhood-based strategies developed by community leaders. The planning effort should be based on a clear picture of current conditions within the district and community, such as agreeing on a common set of demographic forecasts.

Another important task is establishing a site-selection process that contributes to achieving economic, social, cultural development, and environmental protection goals of the municipality. In urban communities this is particularly important, since many of the sites available for schools also may be brownfields, designated by the city for reclamation for economic development projects. The success of this effort

hinges on recognizing that integrating school planning with municipal planning does not compromise the independence of the school district in determining educational content.

The Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant Program is intended to serve as a catalyst for collaboration among the school district, the city in which the district is located, and members of the community. The key to a successful plan is the dialogue among representatives of various interest groups, including students, parents, school and municipal personnel, and local businesses, about what kinds of schools they want and where they ought to go. Ideally, the community school planning process will be guided by a steering committee that includes representatives of all these groups.

There is no formula for collaborative planning or engaging all stakeholders. Moreover, the capacity for carrying out such a process varies widely. The places where this capacity exists and local initiatives were already under way are among those who received funding from the first round of Community School Planning grants. Their efforts reflect the range of possible approaches.

In Plainfield, the community school planning advisory group hired Concordia, Inc., which devised a process that includes forming steering committees consisting of 100 community members from each neighborhood in the city. Working on six subcommittees—social, cultural, educational, physical, organization, and economic—residents identify, catalogue, and map community assets and opportunities and then develop potential scenarios for what the schools in that neighborhood ought to look like and where they ought to go. This process unfolds in the course of eight meetings.

**Provide for health, safety, and security.** Health and safety concerns are top priorities for all state-funded school facility projects. The Long Range Facilities Plan, which each school district had to prepare by December 2000, identifies all the

## RESOURCES

- ◆ Coalition for Community Schools. [www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org).
- ◆ Council of Educational Facility Planners International. [www.cefpi.com](http://www.cefpi.com).
- ◆ "Downsizing As A Solution" [ericweb.tc.columbia.edu/monographs/uds108/downsizing.html](http://ericweb.tc.columbia.edu/monographs/uds108/downsizing.html)
- ◆ Frankel, Jeanne S. 1992. "Advocacy and Architecture." *New Schools For New York*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press.
- ◆ New Jersey Department of Education. "Whole School Reform in Abbott Districts: Background Paper." [www.state.nj.us/njded/abbotts/wsrback.htm](http://www.state.nj.us/njded/abbotts/wsrback.htm).
- ◆ New Jersey Department of Education's rules and regulations governing school facilities design and construction. [www.state.nj.us/njed/facilities/index.html](http://www.state.nj.us/njed/facilities/index.html).
- ◆ New Jersey Economic Development Agency's School Construction and Financing Program. [www.njeda.com/njedaschools](http://www.njeda.com/njedaschools).
- ◆ New Jersey Office of State Planning. [www.njstateplan.com](http://www.njstateplan.com)
- ◆ U.S. Department of Education. 2000. *Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizens' Guide for Planning and Design*. Washington, D.C. [www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html).
- ◆ Visher, Mary G., Peter Teitelbaum, and David Emanuel. 1999. "Key High School Reform Strategies: An Overview of Research Findings." Washington, D.C.: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

deficiencies in the district's current inventory of school facilities, including those deficiencies that involve emerging health and safety concerns, and the district's proposed plan for future construction and renovation. In consultation with the Abbott districts, the commissioner of education established a priority ranking of all school facilities projects where health and safety concerns are the most critical.

Studies have shown that most student violence occurs between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. Thus, while design of the physical environment can affect the crime rate, perhaps the most effective way to address student safety is to provide a wide range of after-school programs. A good way to accomplish this is by connecting schools to community networks. Safe Schools/Healthy Students, a joint effort of the U.S. Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services, promotes this community-wide approach to preventing violence, decreasing drug use, and giving youth more options about how to have healthier lives. Pilot programs are under way in Boston, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.

*Make effective use of all available resources.* This guideline falls under the rubric of sustainable design, which the Council of Educational Facility Planners International defines as "a strategy that works towards a whole building design that balances the total impact of facilities on the environment and community. Sustainable schools represent an integrated design of the educational program and the school facility that responds to the economic, environmental and social needs of a community."

The Abbott legislation provides an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate the economic viability of the sustainable design approach to school facilities and the importance of long-term thinking in public works programs. To raise public awareness about this opportunity, on October 23, 2001, the OSP co-sponsored with several state agencies and the New Jersey School Boards Association a symposium on sustainable school design, which featured innovative examples of sustainable school design both nationally and in New Jersey.

The New Jersey Economic Development Agency has adopted the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Building Rating System to define and measure a school project's environmental impact, energy efficiency, occupant comfort, and other criteria. The New Jersey High Performance Building Design Workshop is sponsoring a pilot program to help school districts build high performance "sustainable schools" that will reduce operating costs, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and provide a healthier school environment.

Districts looking for opportunities to renovate and preserve structures may now see historic neighborhood schools, both existing and decommissioned, with renewed appreciation. One sign of the value of some older school buildings is the extent to which these fine structures have been converted to residential uses. Quality materials, sturdy construction, distinctive architectural character, and convenient neighborhood locations are among the features found in many old schools. New Jersey's landmark rehabilitation code makes it easier and less costly to renovate historic buildings, including schools, while still ensuring safety. A proposal from Trenton involves converting an existing elementary school to elderly housing, and replacing the school through a new wing, attached by a common use space, to the high school, which will be renovated.

*Allow for flexibility and adapt to changing needs.*

Conventional wisdom holds that any building can be a school, which is essentially a set of relationships, a community. As these

guidelines and examples indicate, the traditional K-12 program is extended today to include the community as part of the learning environment. Designers of new educational facilities must think beyond the "school house" to allow for public schools to be linked to neighborhood resources and the work place, and for all K-12 schools to institutions of higher education and, through the Internet, the world.

The Marine Academy of Science and Technology (MAST) is an example of creative adaptive reuse for a new high school that melds the best of technical, real world, and academic training. Located on the grounds of Gateway National Park in Sandy Hook, New Jersey, MAST classrooms occupy 13 renovated buildings that once served as a U.S. Army base. MAST is a statewide science and technology magnet school in the Monmouth County Vocational School District, recognized by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education as an example of the new American high school. MAST has partnerships with the U.S. Navy, the Coast Guard, the National Park Service, and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA operates a state-of-the-art lab on the campus where seniors work on research projects with scientists. It also has a floating classroom, the Blue Sea, which offers students real-world experience to prepare them for marine technology careers.

## Conclusion

While it is impossible to predict what the school of the future will look like, one thing seems certain: Schools will become more like communities—from the global to the local scale—and communities will become more like schools—sites for lifelong learning. In New Jersey, Abbott funds may catalyze building portions of the facilities to support communities of learning, but the key ingredient for their success is a flexible and open-minded approach among the partnering agencies and institutions to rethink conventional and established bureaucratic practices.

While new multi-agency collaborations offer new possibilities for cost savings, increased productivity, and more effective use of each agency's efforts and resources, it will not necessarily be easy to assess the associated costs and benefits. However, maximizing this opportunity to reflect on a future vision for schools that serve as centers of community will facilitate the development of informed, pragmatic strategies. While there is a limited window of opportunity to come up with a vision for new schools that serve as centers for New Jersey communities, the pay-off of such an investment is too great to ignore—nothing less than community renewal centered on neighborhood schools.

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