Engaging the Public in Comprehensive Planning and Design for Healthy Schools

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This chapter reports on a pair of national school design competitions in New Jersey. The design competitions are for a large new high school in the city of Perth Amboy and for the renovation and expansion of the one-hundred-year-old Robbins Elementary School in a historic neighborhood in Trenton. The overarching goal of these projects was to create a model planning process to engage the public in a comprehensive, efficient design for healthy schools that serve as centers of community life that could be replicated in New Jersey—where an $8 billion court-ordered school construction program was under way—as well as in other places undertaking school construction. This chapter describes that model process, the context in which it evolved, the problems that arose during implementation, how those were addressed, and the lessons for both policy and practice.

In both cases a partnership between the city and the school district, state agencies, and philanthropic foundations sought to integrate public investment in school capital improvements with urban school reform and a broader process of community revitalization. Significantly, these efforts coalesced in the larger context of a statewide strategy to promote smart growth and reduce regional inequities associated with the sprawl system.

PLANNING FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES IN NEW JERSEY

State investment in school construction in Perth Amboy and Trenton has its origins in the New Jersey Supreme Court's historic *Abbott v. Burke* set of decisions.[1] In its original ruling in 1985 and subsequent rulings through the 1990s, the court cited the poor condition and overcrowding of school buildings in the state's poorest communities, Perth Amboy and Trenton among them, as evidence of the pervasive inequities of the school finance system. The court directed the state to provide facilities for children in the thirty districts designated in the Abbott ruling "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."[2]

In addition, the court ordered the state to implement whole school reform (WSR)—a comprehensive package of site-based reforms closely aligned with the concept of community schools. To remedy the court order, in July 2000, the state launched an $8.6 billion school construction program—the largest public works program in the state's history. This huge capital investment gave Abbott districts a unique opportunity *to encourage innovation* to integrate comprehensive neighborhood-based school reform with facility design—building schools that serve as centers of community.[3]

There are two ways a school can serve as a community center: (1) reach out and play a more integral role in the community or (2) incorporate local resources into the school environment (USDOE 2000). Either way, the concept of community-centered schools represents a key strategy to achieve the goals of New Jersey's State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP), a blueprint for state investment based on the principles of smart growth—*notably, strategies supporting the revitalization of existing cities and towns.* To raise public awareness about this opportunity to leverage the state's investment in public school construction, the Office of State Planning (OSP), in the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA), launched the Communities of Learning (COL) campaign—a multiagency team effort including the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority (NJRA), the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA), the agency initially designated to build schools in Abbott districts.

As a result of the short-lived COL campaign (2000–2002)—which sponsored conferences, symposia, outreach programs, technical assistance, and the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grants program—New Jersey served as a laboratory for creative community-based school planning (Shoshkes 2004).

The timing of the COL campaign dovetailed neatly with the U.S. Department of Energy's (USDOE) priority to enhance school design quality, which was supported by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding through its New Civic Works design competition program. With the encouragement of the NEA director of design, the COL staff (this author) approached the Perth Amboy mayor and superintendent of schools about the idea of a partnership to sponsor a school design competition—hopefully the first of many in the state.

PARTNERSHIP WITH PERTH AMBOY

Perth Amboy has been a port of entry since English colonists arrived there in 1664. A spectacular waterfront and its proximity to New York stimulated Perth Amboy's growth as a manufacturing center and its emergent renaissance. After decades of decline, a change in leadership in 1990 stimulated the city's revival. That same year Perth Amboy was designated an Abbott district. Residents did not wait for additional state aid to address their facilities needs, however. In 1992 the district launched a building program that included two new schools and three renovation projects, financed with the proceeds of bond sales. Redevelopment also progressed. In 1997 the mayor inaugurated an ambitious plan to reclaim over one thousand acres of former industrial land, mostly along the waterfront.

Perth Amboy's school construction program was about 75 percent complete in 1998 when the state took over responsibility for these projects as well as a new high school and a new elementary school. All work then stopped, pending state funding. Around that time the district

hired a new superintendent, who became an influential advocate of Abbott implementation as president of the state Urban Superintendents Association.

In early spring 2000, the mayor and superintendent of schools welcomed the OSP's suggestion to form the community school partnership and to apply for a grant to support participatory planning for a design competition. The mayor designated the director of the Perth Amboy Redevelopment Agency, whose portfolio included a revision of the city's master plan, to head the planning team. The OSP urban design staff would provide technical assistance. The superintendent saw holding a competition as an opportunity to investigate viable alternatives to the state's restrictive school efficiency facilities standards (FES), also known as "models," which were "developed by non-educators and born out of cost-efficiency goals" but which the NJDOE had transformed into "a set of rigid and conventional design standards" (Education Law Center 2006).

Work began without any new funding thanks to a Columbia University urban design studio, which agreed to explore the opportunities presented by the Perth Amboy community school partnership as its fall-term topic. Meanwhile in July, the state legislature finally authorized funding for Abbott school construction and the DCA announced the Community School Planning Grants, with a November deadline for the first round. The urban design studio now provided a forum that helped crystallize the partnership between the city, the school district, and the OSP and a conceptual approach to the community school planning project. In short, the various individuals involved developed a common language, coalesced into a team and "planned to plan."

This team came up with a two-phase project in which the OSP would be an active partner: the OSP staff would serve as the project director, filling a gap in municipal staffing. In phase one, a $50,000 Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant would support a community-based process to crystallize a vision for the new high school and produce the program and guidelines for the school design competition. In phase two, a $50,000 NEA New Civic Works grant would support the national design competition, which would be articulated with the state school procurement system. The goal was to rethink what a high school for the twenty-first century could look like while accepting the limitations imposed on Abbott funds.

In February 2001, upon invitation by the NEA to submit a full proposal to the New Civic Works program, the team enlisted a professional competition advisor. He recommended a two-stage competition. Stage one would involve a selection process to determine four finalists who would compete at stage two. All qualified architects would be invited to submit a booklet illustrating their conceptual approach to the new Perth Amboy High School (PAHS). The jury would review these submissions and select four finalists to proceed to stage two and receive an honorarium to complete their submissions. The OSP approached the EDA for the funds to pay for stage two expenses, reasoning the competition would advance the project partly through preliminary design, for which Abbott funds were allocated. The executive director of the EDA wrote a letter of support for this proposal, couched in general terms. With the OSP as a member of the Perth Amboy team partners, this level of uncertainty was acceptable.

In October, the NEA director of design publicly announced the award of the New Civic Works grant to Perth Amboy—along with word of a set-aside for school design competitions in the next round of funding—at a COL-sponsored symposium on school design. This inspired the Trenton city planner, who was in the audience, to submit a proposal, building on Trenton's Community Schools Master Plan, a project funded by the DCA as a pilot for the

Community School Smart Growth Planning Grants program in advance of state funding for Abbott construction.

The commissioners of the DCA, EDA, and DOE also held a press conference to announce both the award of the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant to Perth Amboy—and the matching NEA grant—as well as a their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to cooperate on the development of Abbott schools that would serve as a catalyst for community development.

PAHS PHASE ONE: COMMUNITY SCHOOL SMART GROWTH PLANNING STUDY

After a year of incubation, the PAHS Community School Smart Growth Planning study began in November 2001. But despite the support of the mayor and superintendent, the high school principal was wary of the idea. "The high school has not seen a lot of change in curriculum in decades," the president of the board of education (BOE) explained. "The faculty is old and tired. But because the city is landlocked it will be hard to find a site to build a new large high school. We may *have* to do something new, like build a campus with satellites connected by core facilities. The problem is having someone to be in charge of getting it done."

While the superintendent dealt with the high school, the project team's first step was to form an executive committee to guide the planning process, including city and school officials, state agency partners, and civic leaders. They also hired a planning consultant who would be responsible for preparing a technical report to guide the competition. The professional advisor spelled out their charge: "What I need is for you to articulate the goals and objectives of the competition with clarity. Here is our educational philosophy. Here is our community. Here is the site. Here are our goals. Here is a building program sympathetic to our goals and objectives."

Then in February 2002, newly elected Governor James McGreevey disbanded the OSP, ending the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program and COL campaign.[4] The Perth Amboy team quickly reorganized, hiring the now former OSP colleague to continue to serve as the project direct as a consultant to the city. Thus began a new phase of this project, along with a new degree of uncertainty about state agency support.

New Partnerships, New Health Priorities

Meanwhile, discussions had already been under way between COL staff and representatives of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to explore the possibilities of achieving the goals of a new Active Living program area by building on existing initiatives such as those funded by Community School Smart Growth Planning Grants, which targeted urban minority communities where the population was disproportionately at risk for obesity, overweight, and the associated health risks. With the encouragement of RWJF to submit a proposal for a grant, the Perth Amboy team proposed to take advantage of the high school design competition as an opportunity to raise awareness about the benefits of an active lifestyle and how the design, site planning, and ongoing programming of the school could encourage members of

the whole school community to engage in more routine physical activity. RWJF agreed to provide a small albeit nonconforming grant through the NJ Walks and Bikes pilot program.

Inside-Out Planning

Sites to build a large new high school are scarce in Perth Amboy and only one of the three sites the district had proposed suited the city's redevelopment plans. In mid-March 2002, the EDA concluded that it would cost too much to clean that former industrial site for use as a school. While city and district officials regrouped to identify other sites, the school superintendent advised the team to "keep on trucking" and simply begin planning the new high school from the "inside-out."

The high school principal agreed to appoint a group of faculty, staff, and residents to discuss ideas for a new school, skirting the controversial issue of site selection. The president of the board of education urged, "The competition is an opportunity to not just put up four walls and a ceiling, but a different kind of school. The planning team's concern is what goes on in the competition. It is your job to focus on what we want for the education of Perth Amboy's kids." "Let's see what the faculty come up with," the superintendent said, giving the nod to the planning team to start a parallel community-based visioning process.

In April 2002 the planning team organized a Community Steering Committee and invited volunteers to work on one of four subcommittees: Innovative Learning Environments, Special Themed Academies, Community Learning Center, and Healthy Schools and Lifestyles. The subcommittees (including faculty and staff) met weekly and made their recommendations—to organize the three thousand–student school as six small themed academies—to the board of education in June. Paying close attention was the woman who soon would be appointed the new high school principal. Unlike her predecessor, she welcomed the challenge of redesigning the school.

A new wrinkle appeared in June, when Governor McGreevey created a new agency, the Schools Construction Corporation (SCC), as a unit of the EDA to streamline the school construction process. This reorganization added urgency to the need to confirm the EDA/SCC's support for the competition—new alliances would have to be built with new players.

Site Selection

Over the summer, the planning team evaluated three potential sites: a public housing complex already slated for demolition, a vacant factory, and a former petrochemical plant. In September the board of education accepted their recommendation to pursue the fifteen-acre housing site. Thanks to the leadership of the mayor and superintendent, and the no-nonsense attitude of the CEO of the new SCC, by October successful negotiations over a complex strategy for site acquisition—involving a land swap between the city, county, and housing authority; the relocation of 250 households; and the development of 215 units of new housing, including market rate, affordable, and subsidized rentals—also paved the way for resolution of the terms of the SCC's support for the competition, acknowledging it was to be a model for replication in Trenton—for which the NEA had by now invited a full proposal.

The new high school principal now led the faculty, energized by new blood, in planning

the academies. The district's liaison with the DOE, who also served on the executive committee, helped translate the faculty, staff, and community's wish list into a realistic program. He also helped expedite the DOE's approval process—complicated by the lack of strict conformance to the school efficiency facility standards—which concluded sufficiently to launch the competition in May 2003.

PAHS PHASE TWO: THE COMPETITION

Anticipating the pending DOE approval, in April 2002 the project team announced the PAHS design competition through a poster and listings in electronic and print media that would point to the competition website. The graphic design consultant, 2 × 4, designed a paired image for the poster and website for both the Perth Amboy and Trenton school competitions to reinforce the programmatic linkage between them. Anyone who visited the PAHS competition website learned that there would soon be a similar competition in Trenton.

Two hundred architects entered the PAHS competition, including many blue-chip firms. In July the task of selecting finalists from 136 eligible submissions fell to a jury including architecture luminaries (Henry Cobb, Toshiko Mori, Michael Hayes, and Carlos Jimenez), as well as the president of the BOE, the mayor, and the DOE's director of facilities (the superintendent had retired in June). Stage one finalists would have to become prequalified by the SCC in order to compete in stage two, which was designed to mimic New Jersey's strict procurement rules in order to make the design competition a replica of the architectural commission. The public met the finalists at a daylong event and studied—and commented on—their proposals during a month-long exhibit, culminating in the final jury in September. Happily, the people's choice corresponded with the jury's selection of John Ronan, a forty-year-old from Chicago, as the winner over renowned competitors Morphosis, Peter Eisenman Architects, and Fox and Fowle. The results of the competition were closely watched in the local press, reported in national and international design and construction media, and exhibited in New York.

Development of the design will evolve along with the execution of the academy plan. The Healthy Schools Committee evolved into a Community School Collaborative for Health under the direction of a youth services program housed at the high school, with funding from state agencies and RWJF. So the competition marked the beginning of a promising process of change.

REHAB IN TRENTON

As a historic city, a river city, a former manufacturing center, and the capital of New Jersey, Trenton has dozens of attributes driving its current renaissance, which follows several decades of decline. As in Perth Amboy, the school superintendent and the mayor recognized the benefits of coordinating school construction with the city's extensive redevelopment initiatives, but neither had the funding for collaborative planning. When approached by COL staff, they readily agreed to form a partnership and received a modest grant to create the Community Schools Master Plan. Directed by a city planner, the partnership hired a team

of national experts to orchestrate a participatory process to integrate four new and renovated school facilities and local resources to serve as centers for learning and catalysts for community revitalization. That plan assumed that the one-hundred-year-old Carroll Robbins Elementary School, a three-story brick structure in the historic Greenwood Hamilton neighborhood in Trenton's South Ward, would be demolished, even though it is a city-designated historic landmark. A replacement school was to be located several blocks away, as part of the conversion of the historic Roebling factory into an educational, commercial, and cultural complex.

But the student population in the predominantly Hispanic Greenwood Hamilton neighborhood—one of the fastest growing areas of the city—had been growing significantly, and there was a lack of other schools in the area. Instead of razing the Robbins Elementary School, the district decided to modernize the building. The Trenton superintendent of schools hoped that holding a design competition for the Robbins Elementary School renovation would provoke innovative solutions for the kind of urban school design issues typically faced in Abbott districts, which are mainly densely populated, formerly highly industrialized areas where it is difficult to find affordable and environmentally safe sites for new school construction. The challenges for architects included designing a school that fits in a tight urban space, retaining the interesting character of the building and fitting it into the historic context, and incorporating outdoor play space and parking.

The proposal submitted to the NEA in April 2002 by the Trenton team—which included the same project director and professional advisor who had worked in Perth Amboy—adapted the Perth Amboy model of a two-phased approach: first, a participatory planning study and second, a two-stage national design competition. In lieu of the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant, municipal and school district resources would provide the matching funds for the $75,000 NEA grant to pay for phase one and the first stage of the competition. Stage two of the competition would be conducted following the award of a predevelopment grant from the SCC.

The Trenton team learned they had been awarded the NEA grant in September, but the mayor and superintendent did not want to move forward before confirming SCC support. The team did receive the CEO of the SCC's "informed consent" to proceed until the following spring, as excitement about the highly visible PAHS competition was building.

PHASE ONE: PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

At the first meeting of the Community Steering Committee for the Robbins Elementary School competition in June 2003, the professional advisor to the team reiterated the charge he had given in Perth Amboy. Planning got under way on several levels to identify community needs and resources: surveys and site visits, review of extant reports and best practices, and focused interviews and visioning workshops conducted in Spanish and English. The goal was to develop a consensus on the education and supplemental programs participants wanted to see at Robbins Elementary School, as well as to generate ideas for community use of the facility. This "wish list" would then be translated into a space program that satisfied state standards for educational adequacy rather than simply applying the state's FES criteria,

In mid-September 2003, in a sign of state support for the project, the NJDOE commissioner joined the Trenton mayor and superintendent in the public kick off at a student

assembly and the press conference at Robbins Elementary School. "This is one of the few places in the state where we are asking a lot of people to think about what a school should look like," the NJDOE commissioner confirmed.[5] Surrounded by student drawings of the "school of the future," the mayor spoke directly to the NJDOE commissioner as well as to a larger audience through the press as he proclaimed, "The goal of this project is to make sure that the school's redesign takes into account the needs of the entire community and that we work on design features that will help our children perform better."[6]

The visioning process engaging the Robbins Elementary School faculty was not as layered as the process organized for the much larger PAHS. Instead, a core group of volunteers formed a school design committee, which considered research trends in elementary education and the best practices employed elsewhere to improve teaching and learning. The committee met weekly, and by early December it had articulated a vision that was circulated among and endorsed by the full faculty. Their goal to become a full-service global studies community school was a logical extension of the Comer school reform model the Robbins Elementary School faculty was already successfully implementing.

Site Expansion Needs and Options

Meanwhile the Community Steering Committee began considering options for expansion if the student population was going to increase significantly. The options were extremely limited, and all solutions would be controversial. So before proceeding the city planner advised both the mayor and superintendent, explaining, "The general idea is that we will make the architects aware of the space around the school available for expansion, and let them come up with site planning strategies." Immediately the superintendent e-mailed, "We are VERY comfortable with the directions you're headed." Such communication between city planners and the district, which allowed the project forward while leaving many options on the table, was essential for building public support for difficult site selection decisions in both Perth Amboy and Trenton.

The city planner also made a preliminary presentation of these conceptual expansion plans, including the potential demolition of residential properties, to the City Landmarks Commission. Luckily, the commission recognized the critical need for the school to expand and the positive impact this could have on conserving and revitalizing the historic district as a whole.

Educational Program Drives Facility Programming

By December 2003, community stakeholders had reached a consensus on the programs and features they would like to see. In January the district determined that the enlarged Robbins Elementary School would support a projected enrollment of six hundred in grades pre-K–5 and would serve all students who needed bilingual instruction through the end of elementary school. The next step was to distill the community and faculty wish list into a facility space program that would fit within the constraints on the use of Abbott funds.

The Robbins Elementary School program submitted for NJDOE review called for organizing this large elementary school in three smaller learning communities: the prekindergarten and kindergarten program, grades 1–3, and grades 4–5. Each smaller learning community

would be centered on its own instructional commons, a flexible space that could support a range of learning group sizes, from individuals to assemblies of the entire learning community. The NJDOE approval process dragged on for five months, leaving unclear how large of an addition would be eligible for state funds—and whether or not land acquisition would be required for the project.

The team now had to come to grips with the limitations of the site. For a variety of reasons, there were essentially two alternatives: (1) renovate the existing Robbins Elementary School to serve two hundred students and find additional land elsewhere to build a new, four hundred-student school or (2) acquire sites around the existing school sufficient to house the entire six hundred students, which would require demolishing occupied row houses.

The choice was clear, largely because there was no land available nearby to build a new school. A consensus easily formed among members of the Community Steering Committee to recommend the second option. The district quickly agreed because it hoped to preserve Robbins Elementary School as a robust neighborhood school and bilingual center for the growing immigrant population. Fortunately, the adjacent elderly residents that would be displaced welcomed the prospect of state-assisted relocation.

Terms and Conditions of SCC Support Resolved

In March 2004 the SCC—now under a new CEO—agreed to provide a predevelopment grant of $94,000 to support the Robbins Elementary School Design Competition. This decision—which came as the PAHS design competition was concluding with great fanfare—followed an earlier one that specified a cap on design fees, including reimbursable expenses, at 15 percent of construction cost and setting a limit of $200 per gross square foot of renovation and new construction costs.

The SCC liaison to the two competitions called a meeting to discuss lessons learned from the successful Perth Amboy experience. In Perth Amboy, the biggest problem encountered was to ensure that architects who submit proposals in stage one were ready and able to become prequalified according to the SCC procurement criteria. The liaison recommended including more information about the timeframe of the lengthy prequalification process so that applicants would know what to expect. His words proved to be prophetic.

Approval of Facility Program

Throughout the spring, the team sought NJDOE approval of the proposed facilities program, while the NJDOE staff assigned to review the project insisted on an inflexible application of the FES. Finally, the superintendent personally argued the district's case, persuading the agency to adjust the rigid guidelines and approve the itemized space request nearly in its entirety in July 2004. The competition could now proceed. The educational program would indeed drive the design process.

PHASE TWO: THE ROBBINS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DESIGN COMPETITION

In preparation for launching the competition in mid-September 2004, graphic design consultant, 2x4, produced the poster and completed the website—the primary vehicle for disseminating information about the competition. In mid-December the jury (architects Dana Cuff, Monica Ponce de Leon, Brian Healy, and Jesse Reiser, in addition to the mayor, superintendent, and NJDOE director of facilities) convened to select a set of four finalists and several alternates to proceed to stage two from nearly 140 eligible entries. Their approach was to organize the submissions into typologies and select the strongest proposal in each group. "We wanted to make sure that in the first round there would be broad representation across a typology of solutions to this problem, of how to expand the historic school building on a tight site, in a fragile neighborhood context," one juror recalled.

The four finalists were (in alphabetical order) CR Studio Architects of New York, David Cumby Architect of San Francisco, Ply Architecture of Ann Arbor, and Preston Scott Cohen (PSC) Architect of Boston. The alternates in order of ranking were first, Peter Lee Architect of Los Angeles, second, Magnet Studios of Berkeley, and third, Urban Office Architecture (UUA) of New York. Unlike Perth Amboy, where most of the finalists were prominent architects, the Robbins Elementary School finalists were all relatively young and inexperienced. One benefit of this situation is that fresh talent would have a chance to make their mark, but this situation presented its own set of challenges, compounding the risks involved for the client.

Stage two got under way as the SCC came under a cloud of criticism. A January 2005 report published in New Jersey's leading newspaper alleging mismanagement of the Abbott school construction program spurred the acting governor to ask the state inspector general (IG) to investigate the SCC. In April the IG issued a damning report detailing serious financial and management problems and asking the governor to suspend awards of all new school construction contracts until ten reforms were implemented.[7]

Meanwhile, three competitors—a finalist and two alternates—had to withdraw due to difficulties with prequalification. It was nearly April by the time the third alternate entered stage two. Then in early April SCC officials announced that funds for Abbott schools would be depleted by January 2006. Trenton district officials immediately began to lobby for Robbins Elementary School to be included on the list of projects earmarked to receive the remaining funds. Given the delays due to prequalification and the moratorium on school construction funding, the sponsors postponed the final jury until early October. In July the SCC announced the last projects for which there would be funding; Robbins Elementary School was not among them.

The creative ideas on display at the public exhibit preceding the final jury raised hope for the future of New Jersey schools, even as the SCC was developing new, cost-cutting design standards that angered school districts and education advocates.[8] When the jurors convened in October, the SCC liaison clarified the significance of their deliberations. "The intent of the SCC was to solicit nationally good ideas for this type of project, ideas that would be replicable throughout urban districts. These ideas might be incorporated in one of the agency's new design manuals and as such perhaps even form part of a vehicle for architect procurement," he explained. This competition process itself could very well serve as a model for the state, and the superintendent added,

> A loud argument is being made that excluding the district and the city from the procurement process has led to all kinds of problems that collaborative planning would have helped avoid. One of the intriguing things about this project is that it is much like the situation faced in many urban districts, where there is limited space for school expansion or replacement. As a result of the partnership between the city and the district, the neighbors accepted the need to acquire some of the adjacent homes. They took a mature look: we want a good school. But the confined site requires of necessity a certain footprint.

In fact, the winning proposal by Preston Scott Cohen is a sleek, linear form that serves as a colorful *medium-rise* backdrop for the site. The jury also awarded honorable mention to Ply Architects, whose proposal intertwines the public spaces and classrooms around a series of outdoor courtyards and playgrounds that can be securely accessed for community use.

LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The success of the Robbins Elementary School/PAHS model in achieving most of its objectives suggests that it offers a very useful tool to integrate school reform, facility design, and neighborhood planning and to generate creative design solutions for tight urban sites. New Jersey's Abbott school construction program shaped the particular goals and structure for this model, and different political and economic circumstances will influence its replication elsewhere. But the Abbott reforms herald a greater state role in public school finance, involving standards-based, district-wide reform, along with increasing calls for site-based governance and community-school partnerships. Thus lessons learned in these projects apply not only in New Jersey but also in other cities undertaking school construction programs—and other states concerned with smart growth.

Political and Economic Considerations

The story of the Robbins Elementary School and PAHS design competitions confirms that it takes a lot of effort to cultivate a constituency and mobilize resources, both political and financial, for such projects. The statewide Community of Learners (COL) campaign created the framework for a serious discussion within a public forum about the problems and potentials for planning and designing schools that serve as centers of community. This conversation helped sway allies within state government and enabled the launch of the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program. Availability of state planning funds, in turn, got the attention of school district superintendents and mayors and facilitated collaboration among public entities accustomed to a high degree of autonomy. Moreover, planning money, which is typically not part of a capital budget, allowed the partnership between the city and school district to look at the big picture and cultivate a framework within which an innovative project—and public support for it—could emerge.

State planning funds and the partnership of state and local officials along with the statewide COL campaign earned the support of the NEA, which was convinced that the model

for the PAHS design competition would succeed and could be replicated. The competition offered a cost-effective, transparent method to ensure a level playing field among architects and an incentive for innovative ideas that would raise the bar for design excellence in public schools. Thus strategic investment by federal and state agencies brought design to the fore and instituted the use of design competitions as a public forum as well as a procurement method.

The competition, and community-based planning for the competition, situated school design in a broader social context that brought a civic perspective to bear on the questions raised—such as those regarding site acquisition—and how those questions were framed and the input received. This underscores the importance of the partnership between the mayor and the superintendent of schools as cosponsors of the competition. This meant not only that the mayor and superintendent were "on the same page" but also that they understood the need to communicate with a single voice. As the top elected official, the mayor has to be the lead spokesperson for the school district as well as the community. Thus prestige associated with the NEA grants gave the community a voice it otherwise would not have had in the Abbott school design process and also helped give state agencies permission to fulfill their responsibilities—apply the FES, hire architects—in new, more flexible, and collaborative ways. That permitted the architects to be more innovative.

The success of the PAHS design competition established an informal pattern of accomplishment and cooperation among a range of stakeholders that enabled the adaptation of the model in Trenton. Equally important, the PAHS precedent created a sense among the jurors and competitors that the Robbins Elementary School project would really happen.

A clear lesson from the New Jersey design competitions, though, is that there is no guarantee that the winning design will be built. There are many risks, and many factors are out of the sponsor's control: unexpected turnover of elected and appointed officials, bureaucratic resistance to change, and loss of what appeared to be assured funding. Savvy leadership by the mayor and superintendent of schools and their unwavering commitment to the design competition were essential in keeping the project moving forward despite the uncertainties and pitfalls along the way. But given the length of time it can take to bring such a project to fruition, it is equally important to have as advocates energetic and experienced midlevel bureaucrats, both in city hall and the school district, who are likely to be around after the mayor and superintendent have left office. How can this be achieved?

It is necessary to institutionalize the partnership to keep alliances in place for a sustained effort. This is not easy to initiate or to maintain. At the local level, one strategy might be to create an office of community school partnerships that reports to both the mayor and superintendent. Ideally, the community-school partnership will become embedded in a supportive network of relationships that link agencies at many levels of government and the community and that share overlapping reform objectives related to school funding, governance, educational programs, and facilities. In this way, leadership can shift from the state to the local level and back as political circumstances change, as they did in New Jersey.

Likewise, the winning architect will "need to see themselves as actors in a political system, not floating above it as an artist or a neutral professional," as advised by the political economist Lynn Sagalyn (2006, 48). "Without political skills, they will find their efforts outflanked by those accustomed to acting in the political arena."

Planning

The competition clearly served as a catalyst for public participation in the school planning and design process, but the consultant who served as project director actually made it happen. "We couldn't have done it without . . . an external facilitator," the superintendent confirmed. "Districts don't have that capacity." A key role of the project director was to open up the school planning and design process to include other important community stakeholders.

The participatory planning process and design competition did not prolong the school procurement process (which hinges on the legislature allocating more funds for Abbott school construction). The significant amount of predesign planning would not otherwise have occurred at this stage in the standard state procurement process, yet it added tremendous value to the final product, in addition to the innovative designs elicited by the competition. The NJDOE director of facilities admitted, "In the end, the competition was better thought out than the non-competition process, and accomplished a lot of the things that should be part of the school construction program: engaging input from the school, the district, and the town from the beginning; and tying the education program to the facilities planning." Funding for such planning should be part of any schools construction program, no matter what method is used for architect selection.

Jury Process

A competition is only as good as its program and its jury. Together a well-written and carefully researched program and a notable jury enhance the credibility and professionalism of the competition but do not guarantee a successful outcome. Inclusion of the second stage of the competition provided an opportunity for the finalists to meet the client—sponsors and various stakeholder groups—and get a better feel for the project. However, there was no mechanism for providing the finalists input from the jury or the public concerning their proposals. In retrospect, it would have been useful to provide the finalists with a report of the jury's comments, including, perhaps, recommendations for how they might improve their scheme.

To provide the finalists with meaningful community input about their proposals would require first educating the public about the alternatives and the role of public opinion in the jury process. Various methods of doing this are possible. So enhanced, the competition would serve as a tool for public education about the value of public design and the design process.

With careful attention to the program, structure of the jury, and the jury process, a design competition can ensure that the process is informative, transparent, and fair. "Using the competition builds community support, and credibility," the superintendent stated. "You can see the project as it takes shape, as decisions are made." Given the long gestation period for these projects and the uncertainties about whether or not they will be built, it is important that the process engenders such trust and pragmatic optimism.

Implementation

The Robbins Elementary School and PAHS design competitions were designed to mimic New Jersey's strict procurement rules, replicating the architectural commission process.

"Procedurally we did well," the SCC liaison confirmed. It remains to be seen whether or not the winning designs for the Robbins Elementary School and PAHS can be built within budget. But as one juror noted, "No interesting project starts within the budget. It's always a matter of engineering it down. The jury selects not just a design concept, but also the framework for the conversation that begins following the competition, about how to solve the problem. As a result of a competition you are hiring an architect who thinks along those lines as much as the solution itself. Their scheme reflects their creative problem solving bent."

The real obstacle to the implementation of the Robbins Elementary School and PAHS design competition model is what planner Don Schön (1971) referred to as the "dynamic conservatism" of institutions: "a tendency to fight to remain the same." The rules of the game—facilities standards, procurement guidelines, funding formulas, and so on, may present obstacles along the way, but they are also constantly evolving. Schön advises, "We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are 'learning systems,' that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation."

The COL campaign and the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program proved to be an effective way to encourage local experimentation with creative approaches, design competitions among them, to integrate school reform, school facility design, and neighborhood revitalization. It is only through such a systemic effort—operating at many levels of government, in the private sector, in academia, and at the grassroots—that it is possible to create schools and communities capable of planning and designing their own continuous improvement. In addition, there needs to be an incentive for innovation so that local state agencies do not simply replicate what has been done in the past. NEA support for public design competitions provided such an incentive and should be continued and expanded. Finally, for innovative projects such as the PAHS Robbins Elementary School design competition to benefit the system as a whole, there is a need for continuing evaluation through case studies and the exchange of information.

NOTES

1. A series of ten decisions from 1990 to 2003. For case summaries and citations see New Jersey Department of Education website: http://www.state.nj.us/education/abbotts/dec/#4.
2. New Jersey Supreme Court ruling, Abbott v. Burke V, May 21, 1998
3. For an overview of the history, challenges, and lessons learned from implementation of the Abbott school construction program from 1998 to 2004, see the Education Law Center's report, *Breaking Ground: Rebuilding New Jersey's Urban Schools.*
4. In response to widespread criticism of this decision, the governor established a new Office of Smart Growth (OSG) and Smart Future Planning grant program, which did not, however, continue its predecessor's support of interagency cooperation in planning for community-based schools.
5. As Albert Raboteau reported in the *Trenton Times* on September 16, 2003.
6. Ibid.
7. Dunstan McNichol, Inspector flunks school building agency, *Star Ledger,* October 20, 2005.
8. Dunstan McNichol and Steve Chambers, Educators pan SCC's new guidelines, *Star Ledger,* October 20, 2005.

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