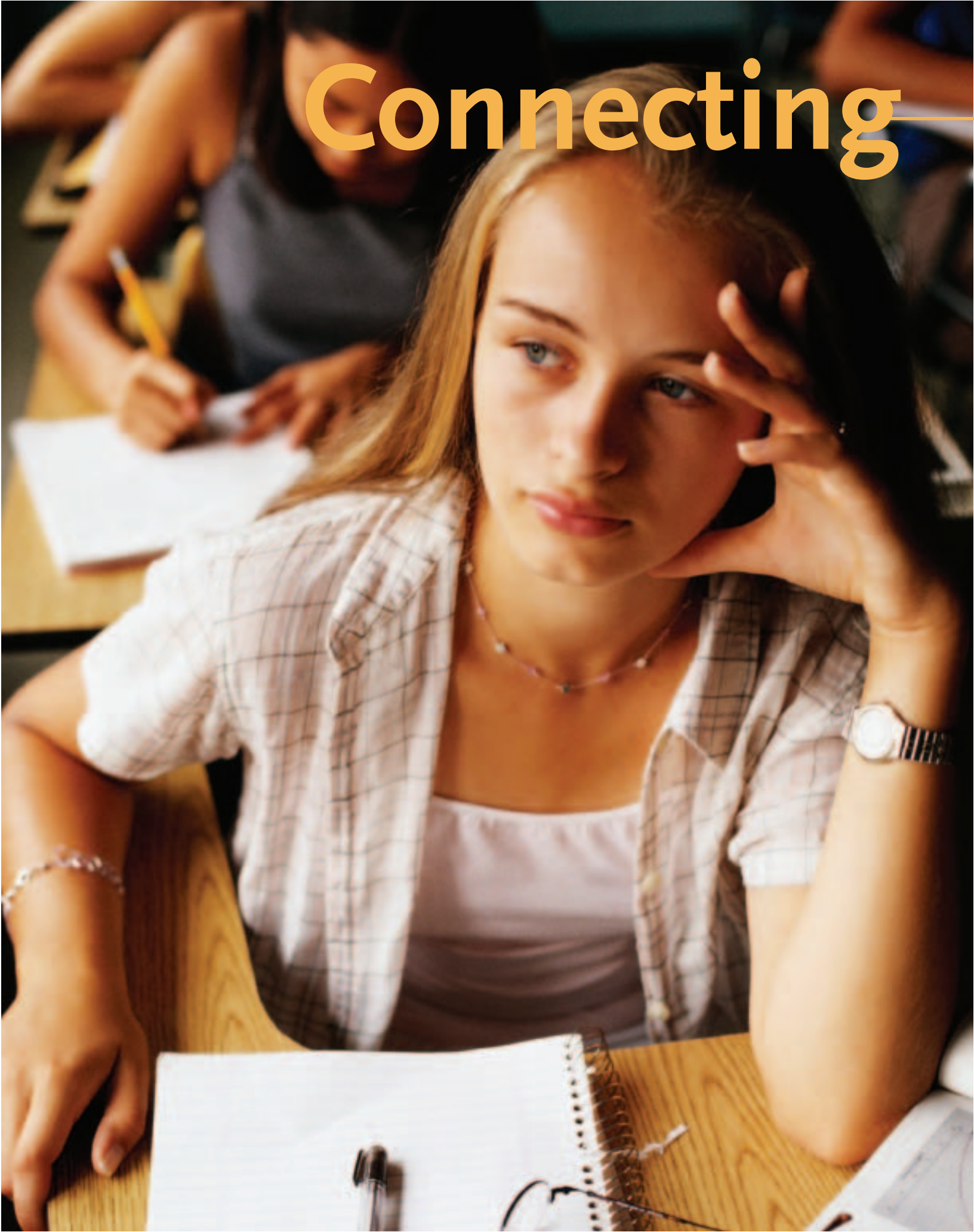


# Connecting



# Public Schools to Community Development

**P**ublic schools are intimately linked with communities. They serve as centers of learning. They employ residents, and they connect neighbors with one another. As place-based institutions, they are part of a neighborhood's physical fabric, impacting local housing markets and influencing the aesthetic character of a community. Moreover, public schools have access to a myriad of local resources including funding, land, and political goodwill. Given the central role that public schools play in communities, community development practitioners are beginning to consciously include them in neighborhood building and economic development efforts.

**By Connie Chung**

In recent years, a national movement to link public schools with community development efforts has unfolded, uncovering an expansive range of synergies. From enhancing urban revitalization efforts to providing community-oriented spaces, public schools are emerging as invaluable partners for community development practitioners on a wide array of fronts. This article offers an introductory look at the roles that public schools play in community development, and how these linkages help to address neighborhood needs.

## The Backdrop

School districts have not always been perceived to be willing partners in community development efforts. Residents are rarely engaged in a school's capital planning processes, and school planners often overlook community concerns. Moreover, as many schools sport "big-box" designs, create "school sprawl," and generate traffic congestion, they are seldom viewed as community assets.

To address the disconnect between public schools and neighborhoods, new networks of planners, community development professionals, educators, and policymakers are being formed to explore the connections between schools and communities. Their efforts have uncovered the valuable contributions that schools can bring to housing and community development efforts, and vice versa. Simultaneously, the U.S. Department of Education's National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, an online research portal, has drawn attention to the links between public school facilities and smart growth, sustainable development, and community engagement. By raising awareness of the benefits of working together, this research has encouraged greater interaction between public schools and communities.

Several trends have helped to accelerate the process. In recent years, the nation's school-age population has risen dramatically, and many communities have been challenged to accommodate a growing number of children. At the same time, the nation is facing a school facilities crisis. Many of the country's aging public schools, particularly in low-income urban areas, are in need of capital improvements and modernization. The demand for school facilities is creating intense competition for land and other resources, especially for other community needs, such as affordable housing, parks, and community centers. Out of necessity, some community development practitioners, planners, and public school officials are beginning to combine and coordinate school and community development efforts. Today, whether driven by need or inspired by research, community-based organizations are becoming increasingly involved in the develop-

ment and support of public schools, generating partnerships that achieve broader community development goals.

## The Links

Community development organizations are linking up with schools in a variety of ways, depending on their institutional experiences, focus, and capacity. Most strategies fall into two categories: onsite and offsite approaches. In onsite strategies, community development organizations directly affect the school—its size, shape, use, location, staff, and student body—in ways that benefit the community. Offsite, or indirect, strategies tie nearby community development efforts, such as affordable housing initiatives or neighborhood improvements, to a school. Many of the strategies are interrelated and can be used alone or in combination with one another, depending on the desired outcomes and the availability of resources.

## Onsite Strategies

### Public School Facility Development

Community development practitioners can use their real estate and development expertise to support a school district's efforts to build more neighborhood-oriented school facilities. For example, some community organizations have helped to develop new charter schools. These innovative schools are designed to meet community needs, and community development organizations are supporting their creation by locating and developing facilities for them. Similarly, some community groups have worked to bring new public schools to their neighborhoods by developing and leasing property to school districts.

Community development practitioners can also use their development expertise to assist in the rehabilitation and enhancement of existing school facilities. These projects offer an opportunity to add or improve a resource that ben-



efits the entire community, such as a computer learning center or a playground. In Massachusetts, for example, some community development corporations have been involved in the Boston Schoolyards Initiative. This public-private partnership rehabilitates the city's public schoolyards, not only benefiting the schools' students, but also providing assets to the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sustainable Development**

Public schools can play a valuable role in sustainable development and smart growth efforts. Infill strategies can be employed to curb what smart growth advocates have termed “school sprawl”—the trend to build new schools in outlying areas that are disconnected from existing neighborhoods. Additionally, the pressing demand for new school facilities, especially in the inner city, makes a school a desirable candidate for the redevelopment of a brownfield or other underutilized site.

Community development practitioners have worked with local government and school district officials to successfully promote smart growth projects. They have ranged from building small-sized schools with rooftop playgrounds to the adaptive reuse of buildings and the preservation of historic school facilities. Pueblo Nuevo Development in Los Angeles, California, for example, rehabbed a declining strip mall into an award-winning charter school.<sup>2</sup> The Pratt Institute Center for Community and Economic Development and the Cypress Hills Community Development Corporation in Brooklyn, New York, are currently rehabbing an old industrial building for the Cypress Hills Community School.<sup>3</sup>

### **Joint Uses**

Community groups can also promote the shared use of facilities between schools and other community entities. The joint use of a library or a park, for instance, offers an effective solution in urban areas where land for new community facilities is not readily available. In rural areas, shared-use projects can make economic sense for communities that must concentrate their resources.

One joint-use strategy that has received considerable attention is the use of public schools as community centers. Often referred to as the “schools-as-centers-of-the-community” concept, the idea is to create new public service facilities, such as a health clinic, gym, or senior center on a school site. The concept also promotes the use of existing school facilities for community activities during off-school hours. Noble High School in North Berwick, Maine, is an example of the concept in practice. The school serves as a community center for three nearby towns and includes a restaurant, an adult education center, a performing arts center, and a health clinic.<sup>4</sup> By benefiting the whole neighborhood, joint-use projects draw the support of empty nesters, senior citizens, and other residents who might not otherwise have a vested interest in a neighborhood school.

### **Economic Development**

Schools are often the largest institutions and employers in a neighborhood, making them an invaluable partner in economic development efforts. Community development organizations can harness this economic influence by linking schools with the local business community and labor force. For example, community groups have actively encouraged public schools to purchase supplies and services from local businesses and to award school construction and capital improvement projects to local contractors. In some communities, schools are now emphasizing local hiring practices. The Cypress Hills Community School in Brooklyn, for example, developed a program to employ parents in its cafeteria lunch program.<sup>5</sup>

Some communities are also partnering with schools to provide job-training and trade school classes for community members. In schools where these types of adult-learning programs already exist, community development organizations are working to enhance current offerings and better link classes with local economic development initiatives.

### **Youth Development**

Community development organizations can create neighborhood service-learning opportunities and after-school programs for youth that benefit both schools and communities. Designing projects that take the classroom into the community, community groups have organized a wide variety of programs from neighborhood clean-ups to tree plantings, design projects, tutoring programs, and technical assistance help for local businesses. These projects benefit the community at large, enrich the educational experience of students and school staff, and foster a sense of neighborhood pride.

## **Offsite Strategies**

### **Affordable Housing Development**

Public schools can play an important role in the development of affordable housing. School quality can have a significant impact on a local housing market, with healthy, stable neighborhoods supported by healthy schools. Developers of affordable housing can boost the long-term viability of their projects by investing in the quality of nearby schools. Similarly, community development groups can make neighborhood improvements near a public school to attract families and qualified teachers to a neighborhood. These projects can be as simple as neighborhood clean-ups or as complex as addressing specific infrastructure needs, such as sidewalk improvements.

Improving schools and the surrounding area can be a particularly useful strategy to support the success of mixed-income housing projects. A high-quality school in the neighborhood can entice home buyers to purchase market-rate units in a mixed-income development. However, organizations should be mindful that many factors, such as local housing market conditions and community outreach efforts,

affect the ultimate success of these projects. For example, despite improvements to the local elementary school in the Cabrini Green area of Chicago, Illinois, occupants of market-rate units within the area's mixed-income housing development still chose to send their children to private schools.<sup>6</sup>

More generally, there are many ways that housing developers can coordinate efforts with schools to the mutual benefit of one another. For example, building affordable housing in conjunction with the development of a new school can create a stable base of students for the school, as well as increase the housing stock for low-income households. Locating senior housing near a school can create a safer environment for students by providing more watchful eyes on the street, as well as present student volunteer opportunities that benefit seniors. Finally, community development practitioners can work with schools to develop workforce housing for teachers, enabling school staff to live in the communities they serve.

### **Transportation**

Community development organizations can work with public school districts to alleviate neighborhood traffic concerns. According to the Local Government Commission, only 10 percent of today's students get to and from school by bicycling or walking, compared with 50 percent in 1980.<sup>7</sup> To help reverse this trend, Safe Routes to School initiatives have popped up all over the country to encourage more students to bike and walk to school.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, many community development organizations are advocating the placement of schools within walking distance of residential areas and transit stops. They are also working to ensure that school areas contain sufficient bicycle racks, traffic-calming devices, and other pedestrian-friendly safety amenities. These transportation strategies not only reduce school traffic in neighborhoods, but also help to address childhood obesity by encouraging children to walk to school.

### **Community Building**

Often, local school reform efforts work disparately from community organizing initiatives. As a result, the relationship between good neighborhoods and good schools is lost. In some communities, school reform advocates and community organizing groups are working together to create a unified and comprehensive neighborhood strategy. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, Massachusetts, the Northeast Community Clergy Coalition in the South Bronx area of New York City, and the national Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) have all developed education initiatives that directly relate to their community-building goals. These and other efforts to tie education and community building together have proven effective in persuading state and local decision-makers. The Neighborhood Capital Budget Group in Chicago, Illinois, for example, has successfully organized communities to oppose school closures. In cases where the schools are even-

tually closed, the group has effectively organized school officials and neighbors to advocate keeping the facilities open for other community-oriented uses.<sup>9</sup>

## **Overcoming Obstacles**

As illustrated above, there are a variety of strategies to successfully engage public schools in community development efforts. However, it is crucial to recognize that public schools are complicated entities. They face a host of social and political challenges that are beyond the scope of what community development organizations can address alone. Additionally, school districts have various levels of bureaucracy that can create potential obstacles for community development efforts. Given the unique nature of school districts, three key considerations must be made when including public schools in community development strategies:

### **1. Stakeholder Collaboration and Community Outreach**

First, stakeholder outreach is a necessary element of every community/public school partnership. Whether the task at hand is to choose a site for a new public school or to design an addition to a school facility, buy-in from all interested parties is essential. End-users of the facilities and other residents of the neighborhood can be invaluable sounding boards, helping to determine the most appropriate site location, design, or implementation strategy. Other stakeholders, such as developers, businesses, and local government officials, can offer perspectives on what resources and opportunities are available.

### **2. Intergovernmental Collaboration**

Collaboration between different governmental agencies is also essential. While the majority of school districts are governed primarily by their state department of education, various government agencies play a role in school-related land use, traffic, and infrastructure issues. Intergovernmental cooperation is particularly crucial in joint-use projects or those that employ innovative designs. Community development organizations and school districts must communicate their intentions to all government stakeholders early in the planning process. By working collaboratively, resources and information can be shared and projects can be coordinated.

The need for intergovernmental collaboration between public housing authorities and school districts has drawn national attention. In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Mayors recommended that school districts and public housing authorities work together to address the need for affordable housing in the United States. At a hearing of the Atlanta Millennial Housing Commission in 2000, Beverly Hall, superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, also emphasized the importance of coordinating housing and schools. She related how crossing agency boundaries by talking to the Atlanta Housing Authority about their plans to build a HOPE VI project ultimately prevented the slated closure of a nearby public school that had been struggling with low enrollment.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Creative Financing

The final consideration when involving public schools in community development strategies is the possible need for creative financing mechanisms to bring projects to fruition. Public schools are public facilities that must meet costly development standards, yet these institutions offer virtually no financial returns for investors. Given this paradigm, it can be difficult to entice a community development financial institution to commit funds for projects that include public schools. The challenge is to make the case to funders that community/school partnerships make sense and can produce significant social benefits.

As the number of partnerships has increased over the years, funders have been more willing to invest in community/school projects. The Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Knowledgeworks Foundation have all funded various school and community development-related studies and projects. To date, however, most financing has remained at the advocacy, policy, and research levels. A few community development financial institutions, including LISC and the Low Income Investment Fund, have awarded loans to community-based organizations for the development of school facilities.

Additionally, public funding is becoming available for school/community development projects in some states. In New Jersey, for instance, the state's School Renaissance Zone program is funding pilot projects that use smart-growth strategies in the redevelopment of public school facilities. Some community development organizations are accessing more general school-related public funding, such as capital improvement bonds or health grants, to leverage financing for their projects. In Los Angeles, the nonprofit New Schools, Better Neighborhoods organization leverages school bond dollars with other funding to build joint-use educational centers.<sup>11</sup>



### Importance of Schools in Comprehensive Community Development

Including public schools in community development strategies is one way community development practitioners can achieve more comprehensive results in their work. It is approaching what some have called “the next frontier” in community development.<sup>12</sup> From locating community health clinics within a school to creating pedestrian-friendly school routes, community development organizations are improving neighborhoods by re-establishing community and school links. Together, advocacy for long-term education policy solutions and greater efforts to link public schools with community development initiatives will both improve the nation's public schools and increase the effectiveness of community development efforts.

*Connie Chung is the author of “Using Public Schools as Community Development Tools: Strategies for Community-Based Developers” (2002), a working paper sponsored by the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation and the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. She is a planner with the Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning.*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Boston School Yards Initiative, online at <http://www.schoolyards.org/home.htm>.
- <sup>2</sup>Pueblo Nuevo Development, online at <http://www.pueblonuevo.org>.
- <sup>3</sup>Pratt Institute Center for Community and Economic Development, online at <http://www.picced.org>.
- <sup>4</sup>Marcotte, Robert M., and Clifton W. Greim. "Maine's Noble Success." *Engineered Systems* (March 2, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup>Conversation with Joan Byron, Pratt Institute Center for Community and Economic Development (September 2003).
- <sup>6</sup>Conversation with Andrea Lee, Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (August 2002).
- <sup>7</sup>Local Government Commission, online at [http://www.lgc.org/community\\_design/schools.html](http://www.lgc.org/community_design/schools.html).
- <sup>8</sup>Alberson, Barbara, et al. *Safe Routes to School: Practice and Promise*. Center

- for Health Training and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation (2004).
- <sup>9</sup>Neighborhood Capital Budget Group, online at <http://www.ncbg.org/schools/schools.htm>.
- <sup>10</sup>Hall, Beverly. "The Role Education and Schools Play in the Long-Term Viability of Community Revitalization Efforts." Testimony before the Millennial Housing Commission. Atlanta, Georgia (March 12, 2001).
- <sup>11</sup>"City of Paramount and Paramount School District Approve Work With NSBN On Planning For Joint Use At Los Cerritos Elementary School." Online article. New Schools, Better Neighborhoods. (December 5, 2003). Interview with David Abel, New Schools, Better Neighborhoods (September 2004).
- <sup>12</sup>Grogan, Paul and Tom Procio. *Comeback Cities: Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival*. Boulder, Colorado. Westview Press (2000).

## For Additional Information

### Recommended Reading

Beaumont, Constance and Elizabeth G. Pianca. *Why Johnny Can't Walk to School: Historic Neighborhoods in the Age of Sprawl*. National Trust for Historic Preservation (1999).

Bingler, Steven et al. *Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizen's Guide for Planning and Design*, Second Edition. U.S. Department of Education (2003).

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*New Schools for Older Neighborhoods*. National Association of Realtors and Local Government Commission (2001).

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Schneider, Jay W. "Noble Endeavor." *School Construction News*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January – February 2002): 22 – 25.

Special Issue: Communities and Schools. *Shelterforce*. National Housing Institute (July/August 2001).

Stone, Clarence, et al. "Schools and Disadvantaged Neighborhoods: The Community Development Challenge." In *Urban Problems and Community Development*, eds. Ron Ferguson and William Dickens. Brookings Institution (1999).

Weathersby, William, Jr. "Timothy Dwight Elementary School, New Haven, Connecticut." *Architectural Record*, vol. 190, no. 2 (February 2002): p104 – 107.

### On-Line Resources

21 Century Schools Fund (Washington, D.C.): [www.21csf.org/csf-home](http://www.21csf.org/csf-home)

Boston Schoolyards Initiative (Boston, MA): [www.schoolyards.org](http://www.schoolyards.org)

Building Educational Success Together (BEST): [www.21csf.org/csf-home/BEST/best.asp](http://www.21csf.org/csf-home/BEST/best.asp)

Coalition for Community Schools: [www.communityschools.org/](http://www.communityschools.org/)

Knowlegeworks Foundation (Cleveland, OH): [www.knowledgeworksfdn.org](http://www.knowledgeworksfdn.org)

LISC NYC (New York, NY): [www.lisc.org/new\\_york/programs/community\\_4616/index.shtml](http://www.lisc.org/new_york/programs/community_4616/index.shtml)

Livable Places (Los Angeles): [www.livableplaces.org/policy/jointuse.htm](http://www.livableplaces.org/policy/jointuse.htm)

National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities: [www.edfacilities.org](http://www.edfacilities.org)

National Trust for Historic Preservation: [www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/index.html](http://www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/index.html)

Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (Chicago, IL): [www.ncbg.org/schools/schools.htm](http://www.ncbg.org/schools/schools.htm)

New England Compact: [www.necompact.org](http://www.necompact.org)

New Schools, Better Neighborhoods (Los Angeles, CA): [www.nsbns.org](http://www.nsbns.org)

NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy (New York, NY): [www.nyu.edu/iesp](http://www.nyu.edu/iesp)

Pratt Institute Center for Community and Economic Development (New York, NY): [www.picced.org](http://www.picced.org)

Rural School and Community Trust: [www.ruraledu.org/index.html](http://www.ruraledu.org/index.html)

Smart Schools, Smart Growth Initiative: [www.smart-schools.org](http://www.smart-schools.org)

Southern California Association of Non Profit Housing (Los Angeles, CA): [www.scanph.org](http://www.scanph.org)

State of New Jersey School Construction Corporation: [www.njscc.com/CommunitySchools/AboutSchoolRenaissanceZones.asp](http://www.njscc.com/CommunitySchools/AboutSchoolRenaissanceZones.asp)

Surface Transportation Policy Project California: [www.transact.org/Ca/saferoutes.htm](http://www.transact.org/Ca/saferoutes.htm)