

## **SMART SCHOOL SITING:**

USING  
LOCAL POLICY TO  
SUPPORT KIDS AND  
COMMUNITIES

*Presented by*

Sara Zimmerman  
Senior Staff Attorney  
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# ChangeLab Solutions

## *Who are we?*

- National nonprofit that works with communities, policy makers, advocates
- Multidisciplinary
- Create policy solutions that support healthy communities
- Help overcome legal barriers



*“Health happens in neighborhoods,  
not doctors’ offices.”*

Dr. Dick Jackson



# *Local School Siting Policy*

Background

Who Are the Players?

Policy 101

School District Policies

*Getting Districts and Cities to Work Together*

*Supporting Diverse, Walkable Schools*

Municipal Ordinances

Q & A

***Background***

# Quick review: Why does it matter where we locate schools?

## Public Health

Physically active kids:

- Safe routes to school
- Joint use

Other important health issues:

- Avoiding toxics
- Asthma



1/3 of **CHILDREN** are overweight or obese

# Health effects of obesity

- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Certain cancers
- Asthma
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- And more



What are other benefits of a school located near families and integrated into the community?



# Quick review: Why does it matter where we locate schools?

## *Smart school siting provides:*

- Public health benefits
- Environmental benefits
- Better for community
- Historic preservation
- Government efficiency
- Fewer travel expenses for families & more involvement
- Academic benefits

*What are the barriers?*

# Problem:

*State policies and educational trends*

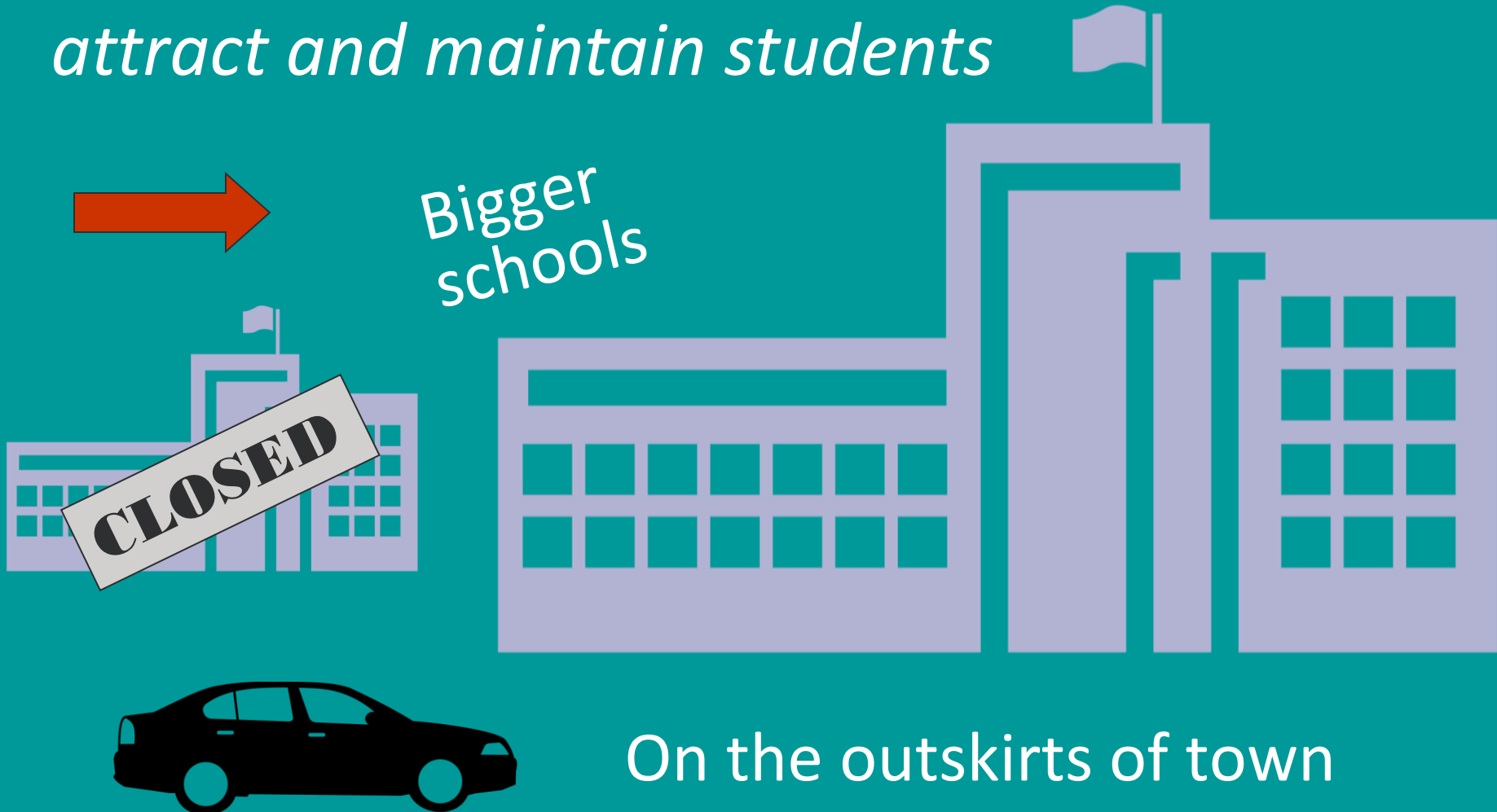


new construction of huge schools,  
not renovation of existing schools



# Problem:

*Local districts competing to attract and maintain students*





# Problem:

*City policies and development trends*



Sprawling  
development



# Problem:

Economic troubles have brought a new wave of school closures



# School is axed

NO FUTURE: The school will close this year



**THE CLOSURE** of a Renfrewshire primary school has devastated parents and pupils who campaigned against its axing.

More than 1,000 signatures calling for a joint campus as an alternative to closure were gathered as local families fought to keep the close-knit community together.

Now parents and campaigners claim that not only were their views ignored,

**By Rosalyn Campbell**

but that the consultation was a sham.

One blasted: "They're just so determined they're closing it and they're not going to take any other word for it."

Renfrewshire Council rejected the joint campus plan as not offering 'the best option educationally.'

**FULL STORY PAGE 7**

# The Result:

Fewer and fewer kids live near their schools



**Children living within a mile of school:**

- *1969: 45%*
- *Now: 21%*



*Time for a Poll!*

# Poor school siting = less physical activity = poorer health

## Children who walk or bike to school:

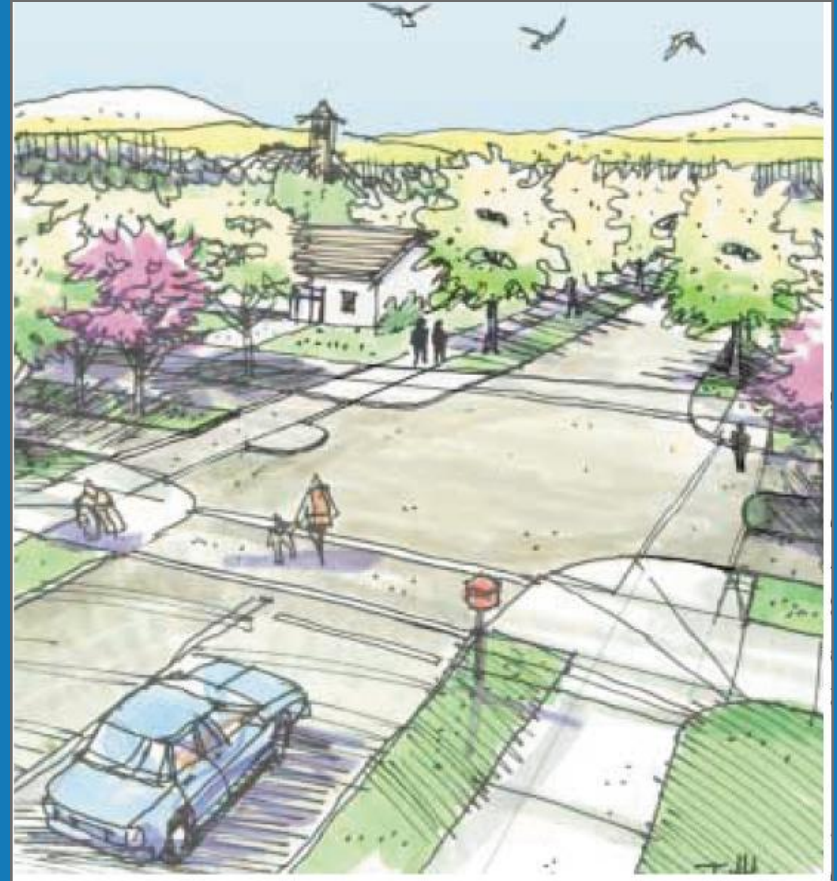
- *1969: 50%*
- *Now: 14%*



***Who Are the Players?***

# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan transportation departments)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government



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# Today's focus:

Improving school siting through  
changes at the **local level**

# *Policy 101*

How do we change  
people's behavior?





How do we change  
people's behavior?

*Policies that create  
changes in people's  
environment*







Policy reaches  
more people.

Policy institutionalizes  
good ideas.



**Policy allows for  
consistent  
implementation.**

**Policy establishes  
relationships &  
responsibilities.**



# What is a policy?

## A policy is:

- a statement in writing
- binding
- setting out a general approach to be applied broadly

## Some examples

- School board policies
- Local or state laws
- Resolutions
- Zoning language
- Contracts





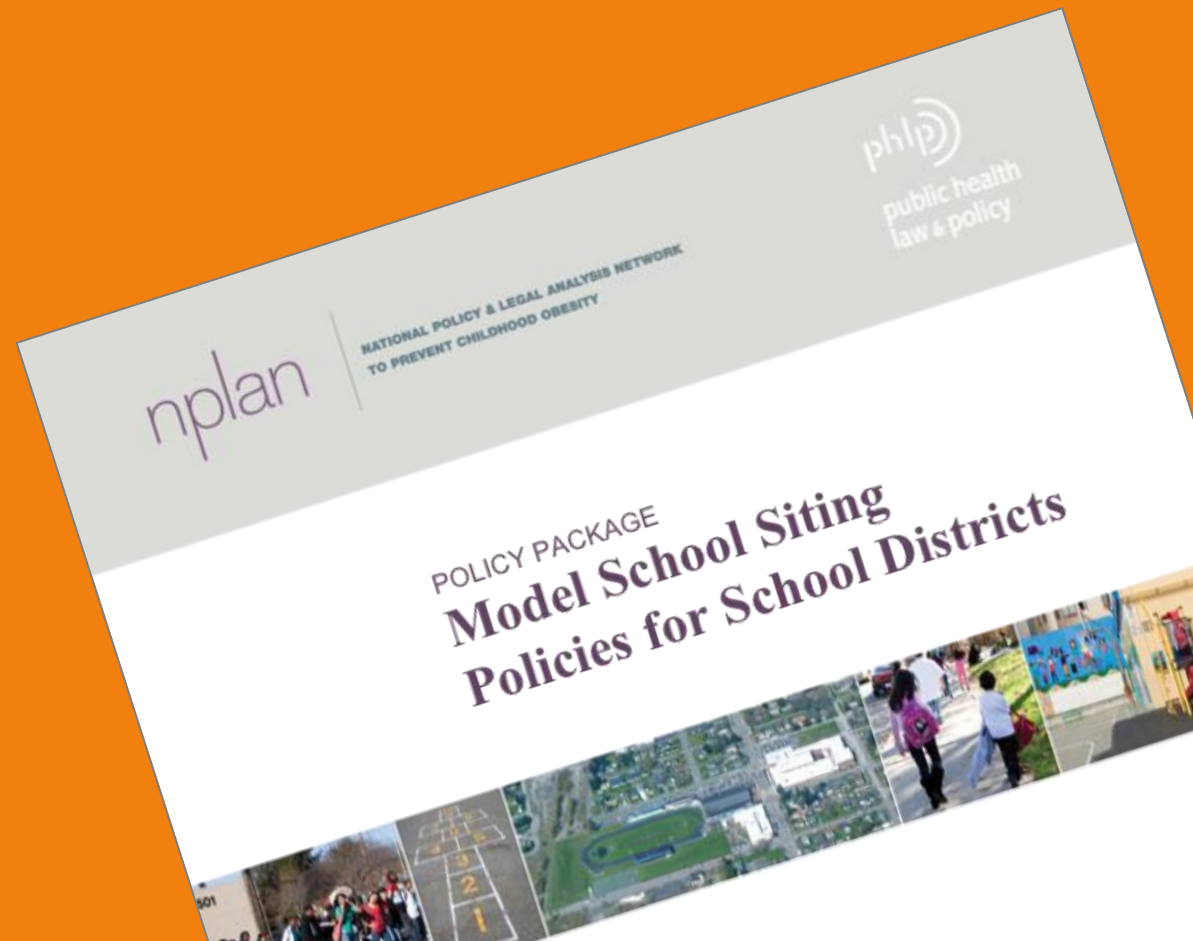
# How do you get policies adopted?



- **Engage:** Get people excited about their vision for change
- **Assess:** What's the problem? What solutions are there?
- **Propose:** Draft a strong policy that expresses the vision
- **Advocate:** Identify and meet with decision makers
- **Implement:** Stay focused even after a policy gets adopted



# *School Siting Policies for School Districts*



# School districts can adopt policies that follow the 10 key elements of smart school siting



ChangeLab Solutions  
Law & policy innovation for the common good.

nplan

NATIONAL POLICY & LEGAL ANALYSIS NETWORK  
TO PREVENT CHILDHOOD OBESITY

## Ten Fundamental Principles of Smart School Siting

*For School Districts and Local Governments*

1. **Collaborative Planning:** Work toward meaningful coordinated planning with [local government/s], with the goal of sharing data, addressing joint needs regarding school locations, ensuring due consideration of environment impact and other siting factors, and encouraging residential and mixed-income residential development near school sites.
2. **Long-Term Data-Driven Planning:** Engage in long-term planning, based on data including projected student enrollment, demographics, residential density of children, anticipated development, and student transportation costs. Provide a substantial role for public input.
3. **Account for All Costs:** Consider all costs and benefits of different options, not only the cost of construction and land acquisition, but also the cost of required street and utility infrastructure, transportation to the site, and disposal of closed facilities; assess costs and benefits not only for the school district, but also for students, families, staff, local jurisdictions, and the community.
4. **Co-Location and Shared Use:** Consider making it feasible for students and the larger community to share resources (e.g., libraries, gymnasiums, parks, fields) by locating facilities near to each other and, where desired, through joint use agreements detailing use and responsibility will be shared.
5. **Preference for Renovation:** Consider renovating existing facilities before building new, especially where historic facilities are in question.
6. **Diverse, Walkable Schools through School Siting and Assignment Policies:** Work toward schools that allow students and staff to walk and bicycle, and serve a student body that represents the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the community's students and families. Ensure that both school location and also student attendance zones/assignment policies support walkability and diversity.
7. **Equity in School Facilities:** In weighing determinations about school construction, closures, and rehabilitation, consider equity of school facilities to avoid providing some students with a learning environment that is inferior to that provided to others.
8. **Health Impacts:** Take all health impacts of proposed sites into account (through a health impact assessment or another methodical analysis of health impacts), including the location's supportiveness and safety for physical activity; air pollution and asthma levels; past or present toxic contamination of site or nearby areas; and nearby sources of pollution or toxic contaminants, such as highways, industrial facilities, or pesticide applications.
9. **Safe Routes to School:** Support Safe Routes to School<sup>1</sup> programs to maximize opportunities for walking and biking to school.
10. **Safe Infrastructure for Walking, Bicycling, and Public Transportation in School Vicinity:** Improve the safety and convenience of travel by foot, bike, and public transportation near schools and on school property by providing safe infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup> For more information about safe routes to school programs, see websites for the National Center for Safe Routes to School ([www.saferoutesinfo.org](http://www.saferoutesinfo.org)) and Safe Routes to School National Partnership ([www.saferoutespartnership.org](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org)).

# 1: The Goals

## Board Policy [F1]: School Siting Policy

It is the policy of [*insert name of school board or district*] (District) that school siting determinations will support the overall needs of students, their families, and the broader community. “School siting determinations” include decisions about new school locations; maintaining, renovating, or expanding existing schools; and closing or consolidating existing schools.

District acknowledges the importance of schools’ locations for the entire community: their ability to serve as centers of the community, landmarks or historic sites, anchors for neighborhoods, and emergency centers. Locating schools near residential neighborhoods and in central locations has important benefits for students’ health, allowing students to use school grounds for play and physical activity when school is not in session, enabling students to walk or bicycle to school, and making it possible for families to be more easily involved in school activities.

In making school siting determinations, District will strive towards:

1. **Collaborative Planning:** Work toward meaningful coordinated planning with [local government/s], with the goal of sharing data, addressing joint needs regarding school locations, ensuring due consideration of environment impact and other siting factors, and encouraging residential and mixed-income residential development near school sites.
2. **Long-Term Data-Driven Planning:** Engage in long-term planning, based on data regarding current and projected future student enrollment, demographics, residential density of children in new and existing development, anticipated development, student transportation costs and trends, quantification of costs and benefits and full-cost accounting, and so on.
3. **Public Input:** Provide a substantial role for public input into short- and long-term school facilities planning in order to ensure community buy-in and achieve better results.
4. **Co-Location:** Consider co-location of facilities (e.g. libraries, gymnasiums, parks, exercise fields, etc.) for use both by students and by the larger community, either by locating facilities near to each other, or through more formal intergovernmental contracts or joint use agreements spelling out how use and







## 2: Long-Term Coordinated Planning

### **Board Policy [F2]: Long-Term Coordinated Planning**

**COMMENT:** In the past, it has not been common practice for districts to engage in long-term coordinated planning with the public and local government regarding school facilities. This has led to many negative outcomes – schools with excess or insufficient capacity, schools located far from any residences, school sites where the local town has refused to build sewer and roads, unanticipated transportation costs, and so on.<sup>2</sup> We encourage schools to include this module on long-term coordinated planning, while modifying it to address local requirements, needs, and procedures.

District shall engage in long-term facilities planning by creating and [regularly/annually/ every five years] updating a [School Facilities Plan], setting out an overall [5/10/20] year plan for school facilities. The School Facilities Plan shall include an assessment of enrollment capacity, an analysis of community growth and change factors, and an inventory of facilities and assessment of their condition, utilization, and adequacy.

# Specifics:

- Long term facilities planning
- Planning based on data
- Coordinate with local planning depts
- Identify joint use and co-location possibilities
- Mothballing plan for excess facilities
- Encourage local jurisdictions to take steps to improve residential integration and walkability

# 3: Procedures for Siting Decisions

## **Board Policy [F3]: School Siting Procedures**

District shall establish a [process/procedure] to follow for school siting determinations, to include the following components:

1. The Board shall establish a school siting committee (Committee) that is responsible for making recommendations to District regarding a given school siting determination. Committee shall include representatives of District, local elected officials and staff of [appropriate jurisdictions] [from the departments or agencies including planning, public works, parks, transportation, housing, community services, and \_\_\_\_\_], parents, and school staff. Other members may include: community members; public health, housing, and community development organizations; groups focused on active transportation, smart growth, and education; environmental advocacy and environmental and social justice groups; local trade/building associations, and other community stakeholders.
2. Committee shall review the School Facilities Plan and assess how the plan accords with the current issues and the decision in question.
3. Committee shall obtain and analyze all relevant data and geospatial mapping regarding projected enrollment, student residential density and demographics, and educational needs, and should consider them in relation to potential sites and options. Committee should assess the effect of different sites or options on walkability, bikability, and diversity, as well as other factors.
4. Committee shall assess all potential sites and options via the criteria laid out in Board Policy [F4]: School Siting Determinations. Assessment of potential sites should include an environmental review, a walk around the site and neighborhood to evaluate safety of travel routes and other factors, and a methodical assessment of the benefits and drawbacks of each site and option.
5. Committee or District personnel shall conduct a health impact assessment or otherwise assess community and health impacts when making siting determinations, particularly when considering the closure of a school. The

# 4: Criteria for Siting Decisions



## Board Policy [F4]: School Siting Determinations

District recognizes that it is necessary to balance numerous complex issues in making determinations regarding the location of school educational facilities, including factors such as: the suitability of possible sites for educational needs in question; costs (for land, rehabilitation, reimbursement rates, construction, transportation, and more); ease of obtaining land; proximity of sites to students' residences; ability to coordinate with local jurisdictions to share facilities and resources; safety of sites for student health in terms of potential exposure of students to environmental contaminants; safety from natural hazards [such as flooding, earthquakes, etc]; site conditions and topography [; as well as \_\_\_\_].

In making school siting determinations (which, as noted above, include selecting new sites, renovating or rebuilding on existing sites, and closing existing schools), District shall give high priority to locations that:

- Are walkable and bikable: A walkable and bikable site is one for which [50]% of the assigned student population lives within a [1/2] mile travel distance of the school. In evaluating travel distance, consider natural or artificial barriers to convenient access, such as highways, streams, railroad tracks, or the like, that may make actual distance traveled further than direct distance.

**COMMENT:** In determining realistic distances and goals for walkability, each district will have to assess its own current and future levels of density and development patterns. Actual school travel patterns for elementary school children show that the great majority will walk ¼ mile to school, most will walk ½ mile to school, and few will walk further than 1 mile.<sup>10</sup> A 2 mile radius is generally considered realistic for biking by older elementary school children.

**COMMENT:** Clearly, many rural communities will have a particular challenge in complying with this recommendation. Different patterns of rural development – levels of density, whether towns have centers or not – will affect the determination of what a realistic yet beneficial goal may be.

**COMMENT:** Where a site is intended primarily for children beyond elementary school, or in dense urban areas, districts may also wish to include a provision stating: "In calculating the number of students whose residences are deemed to count towards the required travel distance, District may include students who live within a quarter



# Key criteria:

- Walkable (significant % of student population lives nearby)
- Have safe routes
- Support diversity
- Near community resources
- Not toxic

# 5: Site Design

- Bike parking
- Safe access by bike, on foot, bus, and car



## Board Policy [F5]: Site Design

In constructing a school or in renovating an existing school, District shall design and construct the site to accommodate the safety and convenience of students, including students with disabilities, in arriving and departing by different modes of transportation, including walking, bicycling, public transportation, school bus, and private vehicles. Site design shall minimize conflicts between pedestrians, bicycles, school buses, and private vehicles, and shall provide safe crossings.

District will ensure that new and renovated sites have ample bicycle parking, and will seek to provide and upgrade bicycle parking at existing schools. To the extent possible, bicycle parking shall be: (a) centrally located, for convenient access by students and to provide visual protection from attack, theft, or vandalism, and (b) protected from the elements. District will ensure that there is a practical route for bicycles through the school campus.

District shall support Safe Routes to School programs and events encouraging students to walk and bicycle to school.

District will design entrances and exits at the site to facilitate convenient access for pedestrians and bicyclists, while protecting safety of students during the school day. District will [seek to] avoid having entrances and exits on arterials, particularly for elementary schools. District will seek to integrate schools into the community by providing a number of access points to school grounds from the surrounding neighborhood and by encouraging use of trails, bike paths, and sidewalks to connect neighborhoods to the school.

For areas outside of District's jurisdiction, District will work with [the appropriate local

# 6: Assignment Policies

- Important for walkability and diversity
- Siting criteria



## Board Policy [F6]: Attendance Zones & Assignment Policies

**COMMENT:** Districts often divide students living within a school district into attendance zones. The zones can be redrawn (known as “redistricting”) with varying goals in mind, such as decreasing transportation times for students or promoting integration. Because attendance zones and student assignment policies have a significant effect on the ability of students to walk or bicycle to school, as well as the diversity of the school, districts should consider using these tools to promote both of these goals.

In engaging in school siting determinations, District shall evaluate existing attendance zones and assignment policies with the goal of creating schools that are walkable and bikable and also reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of District’s community.

District shall [consider implementing the following recommendations]:

**COMMENT:** Because changes to school attendance zones and assignment policies elicit strong community reactions and significantly affect districts’ procedures and operations, a district may be concerned about issues of diversity and walkability, yet not be ready to implement the suggested changes. In such cases, districts should include the bracketed language or begin exploring these issues in a preliminary way.

- As far as possible without compromising the racial, ethnic, and economic representativeness of schools, assign students to schools by neighborhood attendance zones.
- Draw attendance zones to maximize diversity and walkability within each zone, by reference to neighborhood demographics.
- Consider limiting school choice or magnet programs. Design these programs to support and enhance diversity, and to minimize negative effects on walkability. Consider establishing neighborhood preferences for these and charter school programs.

# Using the Model Policies

## Districts can:

- adopt initial policy
- adopt all the policies
- modify to meet local needs and state law



# *Delving into two challenges*

- **How do we get districts & towns to collaborate?**
- **How do we create walkable diverse schools?**



# *First challenge*

**How do we get districts & towns to collaborate?**

# Why collaboration matters

Hard to reap the benefits of smart school siting without joint action





# Why collaboration matters



## Healthy students require:

- Healthy community environments (no toxics, access to healthy food and safe places to play)
- Schools that support health (school gardens, active playgrounds, sufficient recess & PE, healthy school lunches, no toxics)



# Why collaboration matters

## Walking to school requires:

- School located near to residential areas
- Safe, well maintained streets
- Walkable network – not sprawl
- Access to the school site
- Partnerships to apply for SRTS funds



# Why collaboration matters

**Joint use & co-location of facilities require:**

- Identifying opportunities and forging agreements
- Allocating land near school site for park etc.
- Cooperation to implement agreements





# Why collaboration matters

Diverse schools require:

- Range of housing that supports different income and racial groups
- Mixed income housing near schools
- School assignment, boundaries, and siting that support diverse schools



# Barriers to cooperation

- Competition/rivalry
- Cooperation requires more time and resources
- Different goals
- Need a joint vision

# Continuum of Cooperation

## Initial Steps

- Have lunch
- Go to a conference together
- Host a convening on a topic of interest to both groups
- Look for easy wins
- Share data

# Billings, MT: Initial steps grow

- School board member and city planner began to talk
- Asked to formalize a vision
- Began sharing data
- Now, starting to develop policies that commit them to collaboration



# Continuum of Cooperation

## Building a Foundation

- Regularly consult at the early planning & design stage with projects that are likely to be of joint interest
- Find opportunities for joint projects
- Work on a joint use agreement
- Apply for funds together for SRTS or other project
- Regularly provide data and updates on happenings
- Yearly meetings



# Bellevue, WA: Building a Foundation

## Bellevue Parks & Rec and Issaquah School District

- District provides access to elementary school fields
- City provides annual field maintenance
- Committee meets annually to assess opportunities & work out any issues

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR MIDDLE SCHOOL  
ATHLETIC FIELD

CLOSED TO COMMUNITY 8AM - 6PM  
WHILE SCHOOL IS IN SESSION

# Continuum of Cooperation

## Deep Commitment to Cooperation

- Coordinate long term planning (facilities plan and comprehensive plan)
- Monthly meetings or regular task force
- Create buy in and maximize joint goals, even where challenging

# Charlotte-Mecklenberg Task Force: Deep Commitment



- 5 jurisdictions adopted **resolutions** supporting coordination (school district, city, county, library, community college)
- Task force meets monthly
- Addresses joint use and school siting issues



# Continuum of Cooperation

Initial Steps

Building a Foundation

Deep Commitment

## **Board Policy [F2]: Long-Term Coordinated Planning**

**COMMENT:** In the past, it has not been common practice for districts to engage in long-term coordinated planning with the public and local government regarding school facilities. This has led to many negative outcomes – schools with excess or insufficient capacity, schools located far from any residences, school sites where the local town has refused to build sewer and roads, unanticipated transportation costs, and so on.<sup>2</sup> We encourage schools to include this module on long-term coordinated planning, while modifying it to address local requirements, needs, and procedures.

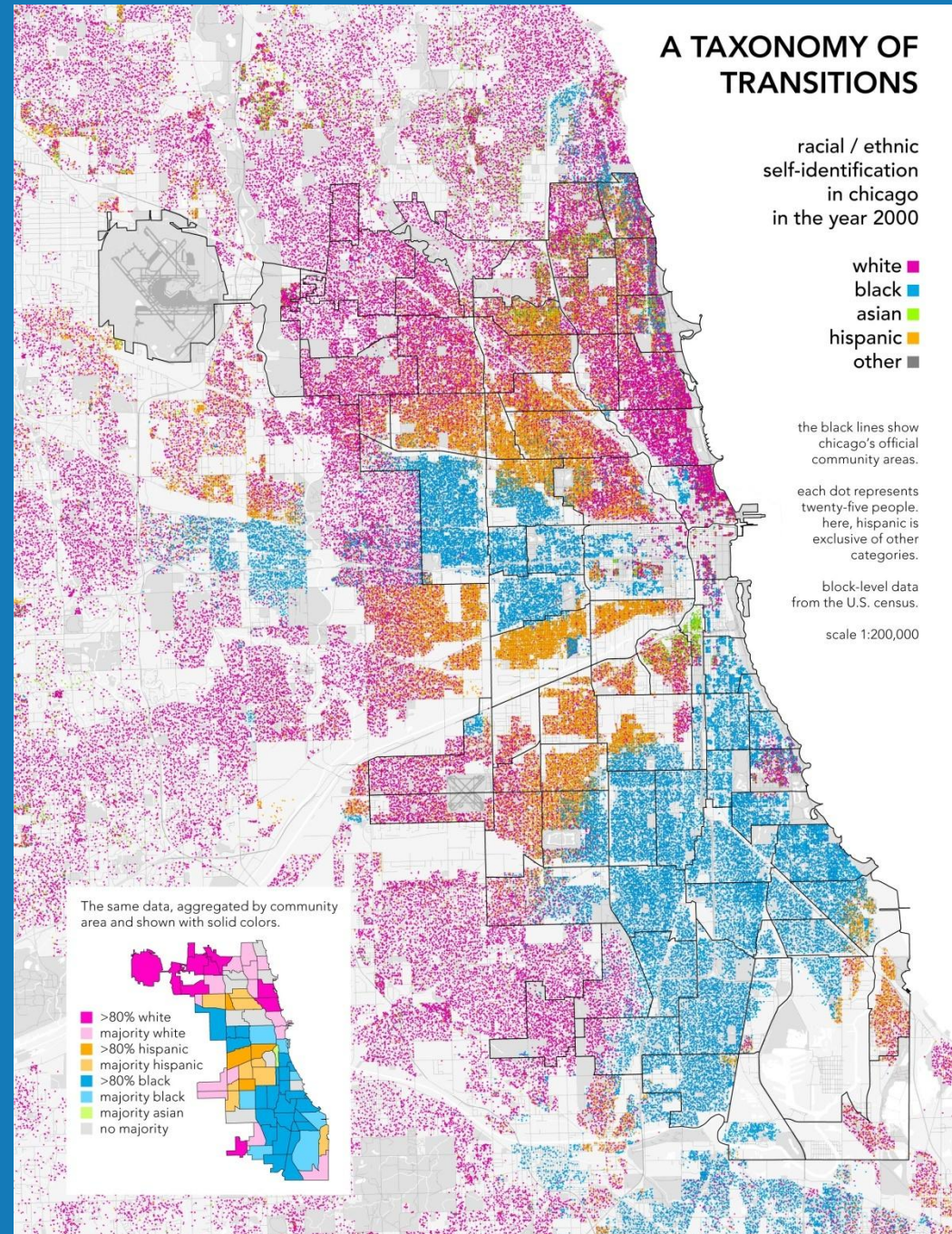
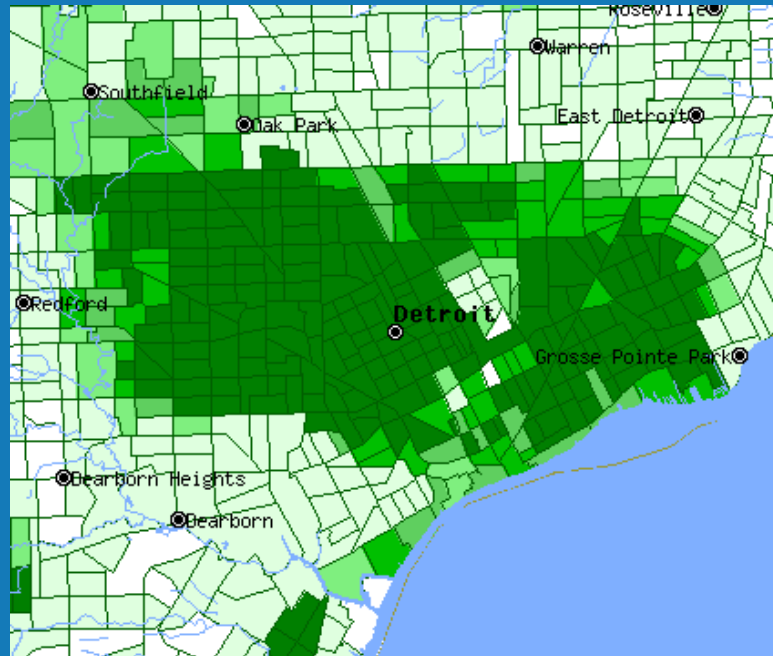
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## *Second challenge*

**How do we create  
walkable diverse schools?**

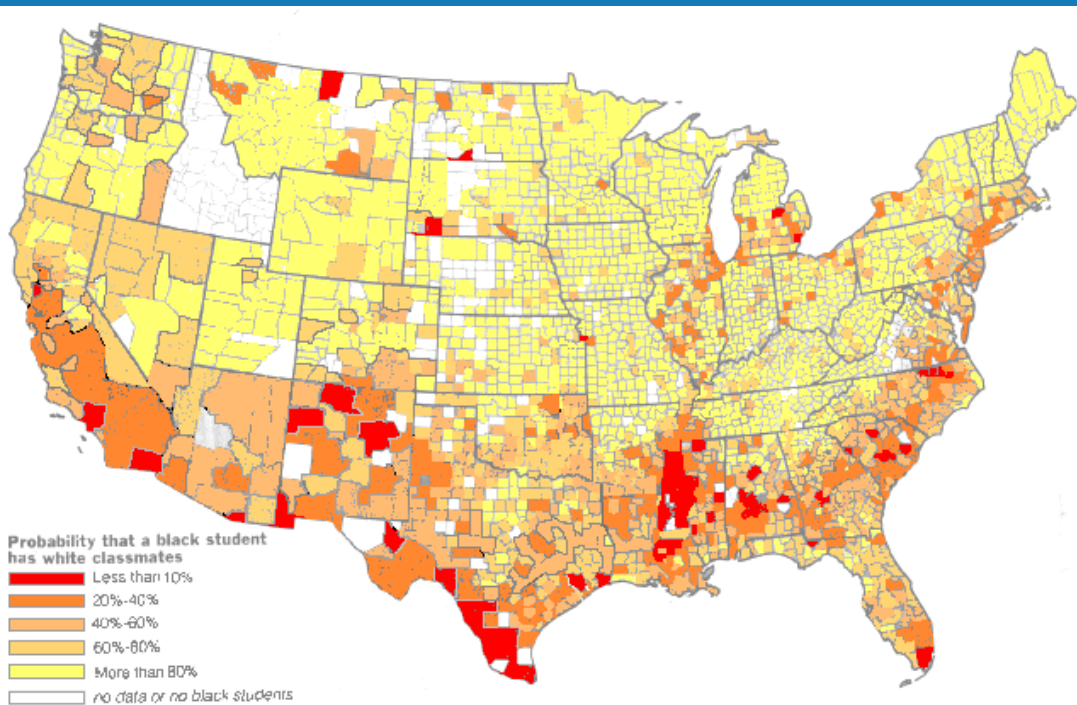


Our neighborhoods are still highly racially segregated



# Children are even more segregated

- In neighborhoods
- In schools: segregation has increased since the late 1980s



# Conclusion

Without countermeasures,  
neighborhood schools likely to  
increase segregation



# *Why does it matter?*

## **Diverse schools:**

- Decrease feelings of racial superiority
- Yield adults who live and work in integrated settings
- Improve academic performance





# Starting point



## The Colors of US!



How are you THE DREAM?

THE DREAM because

Students mixed paints to make "people colors." We created these many different skin colors.

The words on the flag speak

In memory and celebration of

Health and diversity are both core values.



# Big Picture Strategies

1. Address residential segregation
2. Prioritize walkability and diversity in school location decisions
3. Design student assignment policies to maximize walkability and diversity
4. Support walkability and bikability

- Short term strategies
- Long term strategies



# 1. Address residential segregation

- Joint planning between schools and cities
- Incentives for mixed income housing
- Inclusionary zoning





## 2. Include walkability and diversity in making decisions about school location



- Formally include criteria in school siting/closure policies
- Locate schools on neighborhood borders
- Focus on smaller schools



### 3. Design student assignment policies to maximize walkability and diversity



- Preferably, use neighborhood assignment policies
- Draw attendance boundaries to maximize diversity while balancing proximity
- Design school choice/magnet programs to encourage diversity



# Legal Review

- Caution is necessary to conform to Supreme Court's requirements for race-based considerations
- Fairly clear that consideration of diversity by neighborhood characteristics is fine





## 4. Support walkability and bikeability



# Bottom Line

Walkability and diversity are both crucial for kids' health and success

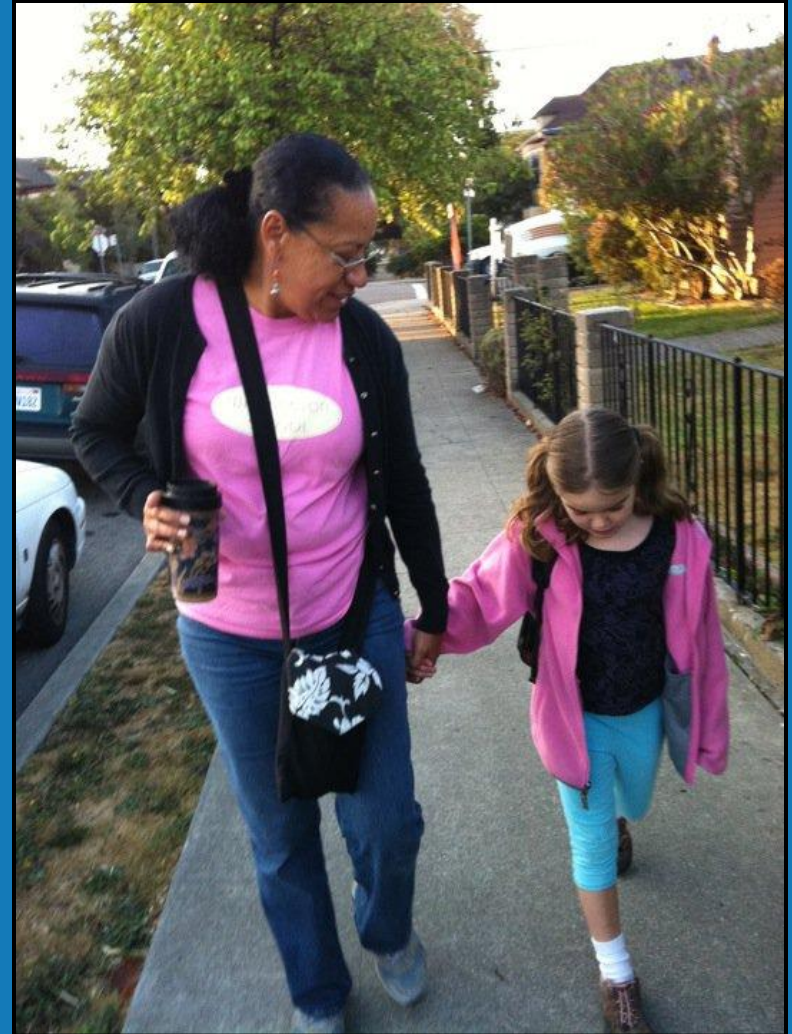
Balance these key interests



# Model policies

Incorporated these strategies and principles in generally

More research will help us understand more specifics



# ***Municipal Ordinances***



# Policies for Cities and Towns to Support Smart School Siting

- Resolutions supporting collaboration with school districts
- Joint use resolutions/agreements
- Complete streets policies
- Land dedication ordinances



# What is a land dedication ordinance?

A local law requiring developers to donate land to the school district to offset the cost of educating the additional students

# Provide a tool for towns and cities to influence school siting



# Problem with existing ordinances:

- No criteria
- Marginal land



# Model ordinance brings requirements for smart school siting to land dedication ordinances

## Model Land Cash Ordinance for School Facilities For Illinois

*ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information provided in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer licensed to practice law in Illinois.*

*June 2012.*

[CITY/VILLAGE] OF \_\_\_\_\_

ORDINANCE NO: \_\_\_\_\_

A draft ordinance based on this model may include “findings” of fact (“whereas” clauses) that

# In Conclusion



- School siting matters
- Local policy is a great way to work toward smart school siting
- School districts have a key role
- Towns and cities can also make a big difference through policy



# **DISCLAIMER**

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