

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RESEARCH

“If school boards focus only on the up front cost of land when choosing where to build schools, they run the risk of overlooking many of the hidden costs. These include busing, larger parking lots, a reduced chance of walking and bicycling for students, and a lack of cohesive neighborhoods surrounding the schools.”

-NC School Siting Researcher

Community Health Considerations in School Siting

Since the 1950s, the trend in school construction has been to build larger schools on larger sites. Nationally, average school enrollment increased by 5 times since 1940, from 127 students to over 650 today (Walberg, 1992—Educational Researcher). Large sites tend to be found in less developed areas, where land is cheapest and



Mary Scroggs Elementary School, North Carolina

available. Unfortunately, such schools tend to be located far from neighborhoods they serve. As a result, fewer kids walk or bike to and from school. In North Carolina, only 4% of children aged 5-17 walk or bicycle to school at least once per week (NC CHAMPS, 2005).

Facility Guidelines

Many states followed school construction guidelines based on the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI) influential “Guide for Planning Educational Facilities.” Until recently, this guide recommended, for example, at least 50 acres for a school to be built to serve 2,000 high school students.

However, CEFPI and several state legislatures (including North Carolina) have recently revised their school construction guidelines to no longer recommends minimum acreage standards. The new “Space Planning for Institutions of Higher Education” recognizes “that there is no one-size-fits all” approach for school siting. Despite the revisions, many school boards still adhere to the old guidelines which encouraged larger school sites that fostered sprawling building and site designs.

School Size and Siting Influence on Walking and Bicycling to and From School

The size of schools and their location have changed significantly in the last 50 years. This greatly affects the number of children who walk and bicycle to and from school.

- ◆ Even though less than 4% of North Carolina children 5-17 years old walk to school at least once per week, more than 4 times this rate (16%) walk to school at least once per week if they live within 1 mile of school (NC CHAMPS, 2005). However, nearly 85% of North Carolina children 5-17 years old live more than 1 mile from school.
- ◆ Since the 1930s, the number of schools in the nation has fallen from over 238,000 to around 99,000 in 2002 (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2002). This reflects the widespread consolidation of smaller schools into larger schools.
- ◆ Nationwide, fewer than 15 percent of students between the ages of 5 and 15 walk to school—a factor that may contribute to the alarming rise in childhood obesity (National Household Travel Survey, 2001).
 - * In comparison, nearly half of students in 1969 walked or biked to school (Personal Transportation Survey, 1969)

A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words.

The school in the left picture below has been sited in an isolated setting, making walking to school difficult. The school on the right has been well integrated, and is accessible from surrounding residential areas.



Physical Activity Policy Research Network This project was conducted by the Physical Activity Policy Research Network (PAPRN). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created the PAPRN in October of 2004 to study the effectiveness of policies related to increasing physical activity in communities. website prc.slu.edu/paprn.htm.

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