

GREEN SCHOOLS PRACTITIONER GUIDE

Joint-Use:
A Strategy for Green Schools

By New Schools Better Neighborhoods

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I. Overview

This NSBN produced practitioner's guide, underwritten by Global Green USA, contains information useful to community leaders and stakeholders interested in creating greener, healthier, more cohesive neighborhoods through joint-use schools. Based on the project experiences of New Schools Better Neighborhoods (NSBN), the following guide provides a step-by-step overview of the process for establishing a community-centered school and offers practical information for community leaders who want to rouse public support, collaborate with both governmental and nonprofit institutions, and embark on the complex, but rewarding, process of changing a city one neighborhood at a time. More than an educational or architectural challenge, this process encompasses a broad range of public policy issues and, most importantly, it involves everyday citizens to help them envision, and achieve, a community asset that might not come about by conventional means.

As many communities across the country struggle with the social and environmental consequences of suburban sprawl and unmanaged urban growth, a new trend in school design that addresses a range of community problems is emerging. Joint-use schools that create partnerships with other community resources including libraries, parks, health clinics, youth programs, and even farmer's markets. These can reverse the trend of sprawl, attract more people to live and raise families closer to the core of the city, and make efficient use of scarce materials and land. Reducing sprawl and outward migration can also reduce the environmental impacts of traffic, and lead to transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly development and other hallmarks of smart growth. The design of smaller schools and more compact neighborhood environments where housing is within close proximity to schools enhances personal mobility and transportation without taxing the environment.

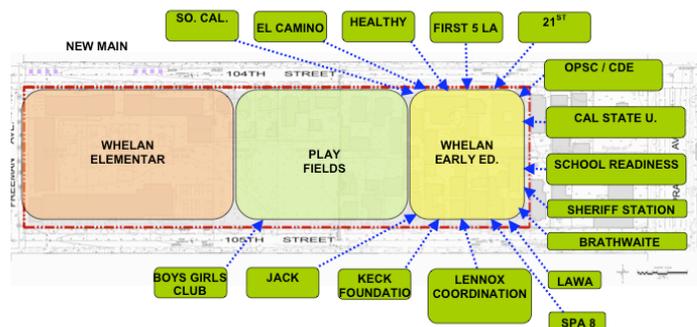
Community-centered schools, whether developed in a school district or as charter, private, or parochial schools, are efficient because they maximize land use on land that is already urbanized. The majority of available space in urban areas tends to consist of brownfields, empty lots, and abandoned buildings. Developing joint-use facilities on formerly blighted property can revitalize communities and conserve



open space. Joint-use, community-centered schools achieve dramatic environmental benefits regardless of whether they use green construction methods (which of course they can, if the community wishes to invest in them). Through a proper master planning process, they can enhance any community whether rich, poor, inner city, or suburban.

Design elements such as walking and biking paths, parks and recreational spaces can be incorporated in joint-use facilities to encourage exercise and outdoor activities. Furthermore, community-centered schools offer the chance to form partnerships with, among other entities, parks/recreation centers, farmer's markets, community gardens, and environmental groups who might program the space and nurture opportunities for healthy living.

DIAGRAM OF POSSIBLE PARTNERS



In addition to using environmentally friendly design and construction practices, such as solar roofs, recycled materials, passive climate control, and other strategies encouraged by the US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system and the Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS), schools have a special opportunity to be green because of their potential to serve as centers of communities. By maximizing limited resources, joint-use community-centered schools also enable lower-income communities to improve their environment through a design and planning process that does not rely on potentially expensive technology or architecture. Community-centered schools allow people to think about and engage in their community, thereby encouraging greater integration of a community's resources and cultures, and joint-use offers the most comprehensive opportunity to protect the environment and promote community health.

II. Background/Author's Role

New Schools Better Neighborhoods is a civic advocacy organization that promotes a 21st century vision for California's urban school districts in which new schools are centers of neighborhoods and, likewise, neighborhoods and communities serve as centers of learning.

California faces the unenviable task of building hundreds of new schools to relieve overcrowded classrooms and serve a growing student population. NSBN believes that these new facilities must be small, community-centered schools that serve as anchors to neighborhoods by providing a range of services that can be accessed and utilized by all residents and community stakeholders.

To accomplish this mission, NSBN promotes smaller schools that can build upon and accommodate existing community land and facilities to save on the time, money, land, and other resources. NSBN employs a collaborative master planning strategy as a framework for the best way to site, design, and build public schools, and it naturally results in schools that benefit the broadest possible segment of the community. Building schools that are responsive to their social, economic and political context requires a planning process that incorporates community input and encourages dialogue. The result is a process and a community facility that makes the whole community environmentally and socially sustainable, as opposed to constructing single-use buildings (regardless of construction methods) without a holistic vision for the community. By facilitating a collaborative master planning process, NSBN helps create healthier, smart, more cohesive neighborhoods. NSBN has facilitated the planning and funding of many pilot projects throughout the Los Angeles area and has focused on inner city neighborhoods such as Pico Union, Boyle Heights, and East Hollywood, and countless other communities throughout Los Angeles County.

Guiding Principles for Collaborative Planning of Joint-Use

The most successful joint-use community-centered schools reflect not the vision of a single educator, architect, or school district, but rather the collective dreams of an entire community. Ultimately, a community-centered school is the physical manifestation of a process that brings those dreams together, finds compromises among them, and injects into them the excitement and energy necessary to bring them to fruition.

A joint-use, community-centered school requires a planning and development process that may be unfamiliar to most school districts and communities, yet still requires all the funding and approvals of a conventional school. For this reason,



successful community-centered schools must follow a series of steps to ensure that the final product truly maximizes community resources and fulfills as broad a collection of community needs as possible. Moreover, community-centered schools often must draw on unconventional funding sources or financial partnerships and community leaders must pursue funding for not only the school itself but also for the critical steps that take place literally before the school is even on the drawing board.

The process of discussing the community's needs and desires is known as master-planning, and the goal of master planning is to conceive of the physical plant – the campus, its buildings, the buildings' function, and the relationship with the surrounding built environment – that will fulfill those needs and desires. Master planning sessions may take the form of focus groups, surveys, open discussions, model-building sessions, architectural presentations, and any other gathering that allows stakeholders to share ideas with facilitators who can collect those ideas and help turn them into a cohesive whole. To ensure success, organizers must lay the groundwork with some crucial pre-planning steps:

■ **Access Predevelopment Funds and Partners**

The joint-use collaborative process represents a significant investment of time, resources and technical expertise, and a large part of the process takes place before drawings are rendered or bricks are laid. While most school districts and other organizations are accustomed to investing in real property and improvements, they may not be willing to put up significant funds to facilitate the community planning process. This process, though, is crucial, and it is imperative to identify partners who can gain access to predevelopment funding and take on the initial risk of funding neighborhood master planning and site design efforts.

■ **Identify an Intermediary Organization to Act as Facilitator**

A third party intermediary plays a neutral, independent role whose sole responsibility is to figure out how all the agencies involved can work together and ensures that the organizers' ideas do not overwhelm those that come from the community at large. The intermediary organization also serves as the single voice capable of bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders. This group must include strong, credible facilitators who can maintain a broad perspective on underlying civic interests and balance those interests with community needs. Additionally, this organization can help organizers work with governmental agencies that are necessarily involved in the establishment of any public school. Bureaucratic obstacles often present significant challenges to uninitiated citizen activists, and a facilitator can provide invaluable experience with and knowledge of the various government agencies that will be key participants in the process, such as the mayor, city council, and city departments, in addition to the school district.

Knowing how government is run, what its interests are, and the constraints and opportunities of which public agencies can take advantage are key to a successful collaborative planning and development effort.

■ Engage Broad Community Participation

Community residents can be the biggest advocates for getting projects built.



No matter how diverse the community, residents not only understand what exists and how agencies operate, but also can organize and exert influence for positive change. The planning process must hold accessible, convenient meetings, and organizers must advertise as broadly as possible. Any interested party that is excluded, either intentionally or

unintentionally, may very well be the one that brings a revolutionary idea or forges a necessary connection to make the project succeed.

■ Facilitate Communication Among Organizations Involved in the Planning Process

The state, regional, and local government agencies responsible for public schools often operate as separate systems, pursuing separate time tables and working under complex regulatory frameworks. The intermediary organization should facilitate coordination and communication among a supportive school district, civic, and community leaders and organizations. However, to ensure success, participants must be willing players, open and flexible to design recommendations so long as they meet their program objectives and timing requirements, and committed to building out the master plan once it is developed.

III. Case Studies

Phase I – Initiating the Collaborative Master Planning Process

The phases of implementation may need to be considered during the process; however, each project will vary depending on existing resources, partnerships, and assets. The planning process for joint-use outlined below is not in any way a linear progression toward the final goal.

■ **Advisory Committee**

An advisory committee is a group of stakeholders and institutional partners that act as a liaison to the community and provide their technical or specialized knowledge to move the project forward. The first step in the collaborative process is for committee members to commit to a joint master planning process with a shared goal, purpose and vision that is inclusive of the mission to build facilities that improve quality of life for the neighborhood. A strategy for moving the advisory committee toward consensus on a specific goal is to create and sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining each party's individual goals, purpose and responsibilities as well as a schedule for completion of the site.¹ A MOU is not a legally binding document but it serves as a tool to keep parties committed to the process. Identifying the needs, time frames, constraints as well as the resources of committee members should be established early in the process, in order to avoid future roadblocks.

In addition to establishing clarity of purpose for committee members, other objectives for initial meetings include:

- Achieve an understanding of the proposed project early in the process
- Define expectations and responsibilities for each member
- Define criteria for site selection
- Develop criteria for partner function and selection
- Devise a wish list of master concept planning goals
- Anticipate community concerns and identify suggestions for resolving them

The advisory committee should include design and architecture specialists who can create a feasible design that meets the criteria of the stakeholders involved in the planning process. Designers should map both the constraints and opportunities for the site and develop a working site model that the collaborative team can use to review its options and ensure that its primary goals are being met.

■ Initial Planning

Initial planning of the general concept needs to be undertaken before identifying potential sites for the facility. The general concept plan may include potential site configurations, rough cost estimates, a general concept of space and facility needs. Once the stakeholders' criteria for a site have already been established, a private consultant may need to be contracted to conduct a site feasibility study.

■ Site Identification

Once the collaborative group arrives at one or more general concept plans, the group can move on to identify potential sites. Finding suitable sites requires an understanding of the targeted area's demographics and socioeconomic conditions, and it must keep in mind the community's zoning limitations, its resources and existing facilities, as well as its most pressing wants and needs. In identifying a potential site for the facility, the committee should consider adaptive re-use of existing structures, such as under-used or vacant office or industrial buildings. Centrally located sites in dense neighborhoods with access to public transportation are ideal for reducing the costs and environmental impacts of transportation.

■ Research

Preliminary research to gather information around the necessary steps for implementation is critical to the collaborative process. Some critical pieces of information to move the project forward might include strategies for site acquisition, the process for site approval (i.e. conditional use permits), site acquisition, the legal aspects of the facility, potential partners, financing options, a rough project budget, and potential funding sources. Committee members should also be aware of funding limitations, zoning and licensing restrictions, the purpose and role of participating organizations, as well as clarity of purpose. People's investment in the project relies on project feasibility good information, and transparency around the constraints that must guide the design and planning effort. The sooner stakeholders are able to voice and resolve concerns before moving forward with any one plan, thereby paving the road toward consensus.

■ Outreach to Local Stakeholders

The project facilitators should engage individual stakeholders, stakeholder groups as well as the broader community to participate in the visioning process for the design and character of the joint-use facility.

Local stakeholders, including residents, members of the faith community, parents and youth, local businesses, community based are all potential partnerships to move the project forward and build a broad base of support. Local community is also the primary constituency for the project, and their input is vital to making the project a success. The advisory committee should formulate initial concept plans

before approaching local stakeholders for project support so that the community has concrete options to respond to. Effectively communicate the “who, what, where, when and how” of the project to develop transparency and increased trust amongst the public. Determine what other public and or private agencies are developing programs and projects in the area. Identify and build partnerships with the leadership of these agencies who can serve as potential allies in the collaborative planning process. Seek out public input to better understand the wants and needs of the facility’s consumer base. Community input is essential information for further refining priorities, for choosing a site, and deciding on a design for the facility.

■ Institutional Partners

Identify partners who are willing to commit technical assistance, financial resources and political capital to the planning process. Partners may include representatives from licensing and other government agencies, housing developers, program or facility operators, as well as development and design firms. A common perception of institutional partners is that they are outsiders to community, which can create a fear that they will impose their views or goals on the local community. To prevent these tensions from arising, institutional partners have to be able to listen to the community and incorporate public input into the design and development of the facility. Partnering with a local institution that already has established credibility with residents is particularly useful to creating positive relationships in the community.

Phase II: Implementing a Master Plan

A thorough planning process leads into implementation of the master plan for the joint-use site and construction of the campus. Actual implementation involves refining the design, formalizing space allocation, creating publicity around the project, submitting applications for site approval, finalizing a project budget and financing, as well as land acquisition and construction. Throughout the implementation phase, project leaders must ensure that the community receives continual updates and feedback about the project progress and impact.

■ Process of Site Approval and Site Acquisition

Site acquisition is heavily regulated, and it typically requires a school district or independent consultant to oversee the process.ⁱⁱ Depending on the site and jurisdiction, some steps to consider include but are not limited to:

- Ordinary due diligence investigation requirements
- State department of education requirements
- State toxic substances control requirements

- State environmental quality requirements
- Local agency notice and coordination

This process could take up to one year, particularly in cases involving parcel assemblages, and it requires environmental and land use consultants to conduct studies and prepare documents, such as environmental impact reports.

■ **Licensing and Environmental Certification**

Depending on the services to be offered at the joint-use site, licensing for day care/preschool and clinic operators, approval of school/daycare/preschool design from the department of state architect, and approval of housing developments from the local planning commission as well as clinics from appropriate healthcare agencies may be necessary.

IV. Lessons Learned

The collaborative master planning process of joint use projects is most effective when the parties involved communicate consistently, invest the time and resources to coordinate the process, are willing to work within each other's limitations and are committed to a shared goal, role and responsibility. One of the challenges that may arise in the planning process is a lack of clarity around roles. In particular, designating responsibility for maintenance and liability concerns can be a challenge due to jurisdictional boundaries and differing timeframes. Stakeholder participation levels are governed by different time frames. Time requirements for financing mechanisms, such as grants and loan commitments, for school districts often vary from the constraints guiding public and private. In order to move forward with the project, stakeholders need coordination of funding cycles and reassurance that differing time frames will not jeopardize the progress of the project.

Because of the open, communal nature of the process, conflicting goals among stakeholders will arise, but an effective planning process that focuses on the overall goal will channel those conflicts into positive compromises and new ideas. Some suggestions for resolving these concerns include seeking professional advice; obtaining support of the joint use project and the formal agreement (i.e. MOU) by policy makers; identifying specific benefits and relative value of the project to each party; determining governance of the joint use facility up front and document in the agreement; as well as outlining a process to resolve inter-jurisdictional conflicts in the formal agreement.

V. Best Practices

Soliciting the advice of professional consultants, such as urban planning or architecture firms familiar with public projects, is highly recommended in order to prepare for potential institutional and regulatory barriers that may arise as a result of the complicated political costs, funding limitations, land use regulations and site acquisition process. For instance, environmental impacts, relocations, or demolitions as a result of the joint-use need to be communicated effectively to the public in order to decrease the chances of escalating political costs of project completion.

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ⁱ A memorandum of understanding is a written plan defining the expectations, responsibilities, terms and conditions of the working relationship between two or more interested parties.

ⁱⁱ www.cashnet.org/resource-center/browse.esiml?sid=2