Better Buildings: Better Schools  Issue #68, Fall 2013

News and commentary on public-school facilities from the local and national perspectives of the 21st Century School Fund (21CSF), a Washington, D.C. based nonprofit - working to build the public will and capacity to improve public-school facilities.

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Support 21CSF and Help Improve Our Nation's K-12 Learning Environments

As this year closes please donate to the 21st Century School Fund. Your contributions help us bring innovative tools, technical assistance, research and policy guidance to states, local school districts, non-profits and community groups who are working for safe, healthy, and well designed public school buildings and grounds for all children in all communities. Donate now to advance this effort.

District of Columbia Launches Process to Revise Student Assignment Policies

D.C.'s major demographic shifts of the last few decades and the establishment of more than one hundred public charter schools have necessitated a review and revision to D.C.'s student assignment objectives and its policies. In October, D.C. established a city-wide citizen advisory committee to help the D.C. government complete the first substantial revision of student assignment policy since 1968. In its process, D.C. is soliciting public input, researching other cities, utilizing current population data, new population projections, updated school inventory data, and innovative data-analysis tools to provide the citizen committee and policy makers with the information they need to select an appropriate mix of policy solutions. The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education is responsible for the revisions to student assignment policies and all documents associated with this process. The 21st Century School Fund is providing technical support. Background and history on student assignment for the District of Columbia is provided in Policy Brief #1: D.C. Student Assignment and Choice.

Student Assignment in Other Cities

21CSF reviewed other cities that have recently revised student assignment policies to address challenges associated with school choice, diversity, equitable access to quality schools and high cost of transportation and the value of walkability. The cities of interest to the District of Columbia were: Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, New Orleans, Denver, Baltimore, and the D.C. regional county school districts. Each school district or city has tried to balance a number of often-competing values and policy goals in their student assignment approach. Although jurisdictions generally share these values, they balance and prioritize these values differently. This Policy Brief #2 for the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education's student assignment initiative is available on the District of Columbia Deputy Mayor for Education's website.

Health and Education Advocates Struggle with the Issues around Diverse and Walkable Schools

In August 2013 the Safe Routes to School National Partnership (SRTS) and the National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN, a project of ChangeLab Solutions) and PolicyLink released,
Maximizing Walkability, Diversity and Educational Equity in U.S. Schools. In 2011 SRTS, NPlan and PolicyLink convened health and education advocates in New York City to examine the implications of advocating for diverse, racially integrated schools and advocating for schools to which children can safely walk and bicycle. The original framing paper for this meeting was written by Jeffrey Vincent and Deborah McKoy of the Center for Cities and Schools at the University of California, Berkeley and Mary Filardo of the 21st Century School Fund.

Facilities Equity Needs to be part of the U.S. ED’s Office of Civil Rights Data Collection Plan

Facilities finance litigation has forced facilities data and information into the light of day in some states. However, there are still extremely limited state and no federal assessments or monitoring of public school facilities conditions, design, utilization or access. The Office of Civil rights is responsible for reviewing civil rights complaints. However they have no school facilities data to evaluate any equity issues associated with the condition of public school buildings and grounds. The 21st Century School Fund submitted comments in August 2013 to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) recommending that basic facilities data should be collected by the U.S. Department of Education OCR.

These comments followed our submission, Facilities: Fairness & Effects: Evidence and Recommendations Concerning the Impact of School Facilities on Civil Rights and Student Achievement, to the U.S. ED’s Excellence & Equity Commission to include facilities. There is no other federal data collection of this information but school districts maintain basic facilities data; which could be accessed through available technology today.

Senators Propose Making School Construction Tax Credits Permanent

Senator's John Rockefeller (WV), Sherrod Brown (OH), Tom Harkin (IA) and Tim Johnson (SD) introduced the Rebuilding America’s Schools Act (S.1523) on Sept. 18, 2013. This act would make permanent Qualified School Construction Bonds (QSCBs) at an annual maximum spending cap of $11 billion. This tax credit program was created by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). The QSCBs can be used to finance the construction, rehabilitation or repair of public school facilities or the acquisition of land.

The act would also make permanent Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZABs) at an annual maximum spending cap of $1.4 billion. Established in 1997 and administered by the Internal Revenue Service, the QZABs allow school districts serving low income student (35% or more free and reduced lunch) to issue tax credit bonds that save on interest costs for financing school renovations and repairs. These bonds cannot be used for new construction. In addition, the bill modifies the private business contribution requirement making it easier for districts to secure. Learn more regarding the bill and its current status at www.Thomas.gov and search for bill number S.1523.

Center for Green Schools Working for New GAO School Facilities Report

U.S. Green Building Council's Center for Green Schools has reported that the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) will conduct a new report on the Condition of America's public school facilities. The last GAO study on the condition of America's school facilities was completed 18 years ago. For more information on the need to modernize and maintain our nation's school infrastructure see the Center for Green School's 2013 State of our Schools report.

2013 National Council on School Facilities Annual Meeting

In early December, state school facilities officials convened in Washington, D.C. for the first conference of the National Council on School Facilities. The annual conference provided state K-12 facilities officials the opportunity to share best practices and to strategize on advocacy efforts for improving K-12 learning environments. At this conference, the state school officials:

- shared how various states are managing information on school facilities and discussed how the National Council can advance the use of common definitions and measures of school facilities to enable valid summation and comparisons of school facilities within states and across states;
- discussed state facilities standards and their rationale, and explored how the National Council can capture better information on current state policy and practice;
learned about federal developments related to school facilities, including U.S. Department of Education activities related to school facilities; and a newly requested GAO study on the condition of America's public school facilities; and

explored how current and future education, facilities and technology developments will impact school facilities five to ten years into the future; and how state facility agencies will need to be positioned to address these new developments.

School Facilities News from Around the Country

- School Building Authority Marks $10 Billion in Expenditures
- Detroiters on hook for millions used to renovate schools now empty or demolished
- New Jersey State's Urban Schools Need Extensive Repairs and Expansion, Report Says
- Tribune Looks At The Mismanagement That Led To CPS' Historic School Closures
- DCPS begins to redraw school boundaries