Better Buildings: Better Schools

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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.

In This Issue


School Safety and Security

Many parents, teachers, school principals, and school-board members are increasingly concerned about school security after the horrible events at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. There is also interest in ensuring schools are as safe as possible from natural disasters, like the recent Hurricane Sandy. The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities has a Safe School Facilities Checklist and other materials collected to assist school districts and communities in making schools secure and safe for children and staff.

The free online checklist includes over 400 items that together create an assessment of the safety and security of school buildings and grounds. The 400 measures cover school surroundings, school grounds, buildings and facilities, communications systems, building access control and surveillance, utility systems, mechanical systems, and emergency power. The checklist may be used for assessing existing schools and district facilities or for planning and designing new ones.

On February 6, 2013 the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI) will hold a day long summit in Washington, D.C. to bring educators, administrators, government agencies, elected officials, NGO's and security experts together to begin work to create a best practices document addressing school security as it relates to the planning, design and operational protocols of the physical environment.

School Closings in Urban Districts

Many urban school districts from around the nation are deciding whether to retain or close schools and school buildings that they have been operating for generations. Community and neighborhood groups are raising objections to these closings based on concerns about:

- school and neighborhood equity,
- the loss of public assets to private operators and owners, and
- the short and long term efficacy of these actions in saving money or improving school quality.

There have been a number new reports and many articles about these closings. The issues and concerns raised in these important cities illustrate the combined challenges population and educational change and generally weak policy and governance processes and structures create when considering these proposals that have long term, neighborhood, school and fiscal implications. The groups identified here a just a few of the many organizations and groups engaged in this important issue.
Chicago, IL - Chicago Public Schools established a School Utilization Commission to make recommendations to CPS on standards for school capacity and utilization. Using these standards, CPS claims that nearly 140 public schools are half-empty. Mayor Rahm Emanuel has proposed closing as many as 100 of the district's public schools. The proposed actions and standards are being called into question by many community organizations. Blocks Together, a member of the State Legislative Task Force on Education Facility Planning, which has questioned and challenged CPS school actions and lack of plans or public processes, is organizing parents to challenge CPS process. Raise your Hand has done a report, Apples to Apples showing that the maximum class size used to set the individual school capacities was 36 students per class. Students, parents, and members of Local School Councils have filed a complaint that the methods of selecting schools for turnarounds and closings is has a discriminatory impact on minority and low income communities.

Philadelphia, PA - The Philadelphia School District has identified 37 public schools to be closed possibly by June 2013. Under-utilization and budget problems are a few of the factors being voiced. Superintendent William Hite Jr. is wrestling with a $1.1 billion cumulative budget deficit for the school system over the next five years. It is reported that the closures would save the district $28 million. Many community and neighborhood groups contest that the closings would disproportionately affect poor and minority students. Youth United for Change, is helping support the Gompers Elementary School Community. A study released by the Pew Charitable Trusts in Oct of 2011, explores the factors prompting school closings in Philadelphia and other cities.

Washington, D.C. - Chancellor Kaya Henderson closed 13 schools because of low enrollment and under-utilization, she relocated 2 other schools. 11 buildings are being closed in this process. DCPS sought input from parents and community leaders at an interactive website www.engagedcps.org. Empower DC has been organizing parents, particularly in the Ward 7 part of the District of Columbia to object to the disproportionate impact the closings have on low income communities and to seek greater investment in the schools in their community, where over half of their students attend public charter schools. DC Fiscal Policy Institute questioned whether the claims to save nearly $8.5 million a year in staffing would materialize. Concerns have been raised by community groups education advocates believe most of the immediate savings generated from the closings would be nullified by the logistics of the closures themselves (pay for inventory, relocation and storage).

New York, NY - According to a New York Times article, since taking office in 2002, the Mayor Bloomberg administration has closed around 140 schools and replaced many of them with new schools and charters. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform found that elementary and middle schools on the city's list of closed schools "had much higher percentages of black and Latino students than the city average, as well as much higher percentages of pupils qualifying for free lunches." "They are closing the schools that have the most challenges, rather than trying to intervene to end the cycle of just closing the school and sending the kids somewhere else, and then when they get the same results they will just close that school."

Sacramento, CA - Sacramento City Unified is considering closing 11 elementary schools. The school district ranked under-utilized schools as an indicator on which schools to close. The district anticipates $10 million in savings over the next 4 years by closing the schools to address a $10-12 million budget deficit for the 2013-14 school year. Parents question the methodology used in selecting the proposed schools to close that will affect 3,700 students. Parents and community members from more than 10 cities including Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Atlanta, Washington D.C. and Baltimore have filed or are in the process of filing Title VI complaints regarding school closures. The complaints claim that there is a disproportionate impact of school closings on minority and low income communities. The Department of Education has scheduled a hearing on the issue on January 29th.

Editor's Note:
The 21st Century School Fund, with the Urban Institute, provided data and technical support to DCPS (the District of Columbia's public school system) in their recent round of school closings and is currently working on the upcoming feeder pattern and boundary changes for DCPS. There is little research on the impact and efficacy of school
closings and insufficient public policy models to guide the short term decision making on managing unstable portfolios of schools. The public and practitioners need more knowledge, tools, and a shared vision for our great urban school systems. The vision must be one, however, that includes the families and communities that have been its backbone for generations as partners, not objects of school reform.

**D.C. Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education is Working on Master Education Facility Plan**

The Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) is getting ready to finalize a new Master Facilities Plan for public schools in the District of Columbia. Goals of the project are to:

*Develop a framework to build a network of high-quality facilities for public education in the District of Columbia;*
*Build a fact-based assessment of school facility conditions and needs in the District of Columbia; and*
*Develop a decision-making framework to help the Mayor, Council, education leaders, and citizens of the District of Columbia make informed decisions on the allocation of capital resources.*

The report will look broadly and strategically, not making decisions for individual schools. It is expected to review the condition of DCPS and charter school buildings, their adequacy (how well they work given the school's educational program), how efficiently enrollment fits into the number of buildings, and the location of buildings, all the while considering needs for future growth, budget constraints and equity across the city.

The DME's office has briefed DCPS and the D.C. Public Charter School Board, as well as numerous citizens' groups with respect to the guiding principles governing the MFP. Detailed assessments of school facilities have been gathered and new demographic forecasting is being completed. The DME's office expects to provide the plan to the Council around the end of January.

In anticipation of the Master Facility Plan, please keep in mind the [PK-12 Public Educational Facilities Master Plan Evaluation Guide](#) developed by the 21st Century School Fund. This short checklist provides a framework for reviewing the quality of the master plan. [See more information about the project](#).

**State K-12 School Facilities Officials Form National Council on School Facilities**

In early December state officials from public K-12 school-facilities agencies met to establish a new organization to advance the effectiveness of states in their varied responsibilities for public school facilities. The Council has begun its work to establish capacity to share best practices and policies and provide data, metrics, and standards, on K-12 facilities. The founding board of directors includes:

- **President**: Robert Gorrell, Director, New Mexico Public School Facilities Authority
- **President Elect and Secretary**: Kathleen Moore, Director School Facilities Transportation Services, California Department of Education
- **Treasurer**: Gary Schwartz, School Facilities Consultant, Iowa Department of Education
- **At-Large Representative**: Mike Rowland, Director of Facilities Services, Georgia Department of Education
- **At-Large Representative**: Bernie Piaia, Director of Facilities, New Jersey Department of Education
- **Western Region Representative**: Gordon Beck, Director of School Facilities and Organization, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State (also serving as past president)
- **Midwestern Region Representative**: Melanie Drerup, Deputy Chief of Planning, Ohio Schools Facilities Commission
- **Southern Region Representative**: Barbara Bice, School Facilities Branch Chief, Maryland Department of Education
- **Northeastern Region Representative**: Carl Thurnau, Director of Facilities, New York State Education Department

**Oregon School Facilities**

According to the report, "[State Capital Spending on PK-12 School Facilities](#)", Oregon ranked 39th in the nation for
school facilities spending in fiscal years 2005 through 2008; with an average capital outlay of only $613 per student per year. The state only paid 3% of the total capital outlay. Local school districts in Oregon have their own taxing authority for raising funds for school facilities.

The Center for Innovative School Facilities based in Portland, has been working to improve the quality of PK-12 facilities in the state, including making them more sustainable and planned in cooperation with other public agencies. The Center is also working to define a state role, and identify state responsibilities and funding, since currently Oregon provides so little support to local districts for school facilities.

The Center for Innovative School Facilities issued a report, "School Facilities and Student Achievement" that examines how facility conditions affect student achievement. According to the report, "While factors such as teachers and parental involvement have an indisputable impact on student achievement, school facilities - the places where our children spend the majority of their waking hours - can significantly weaken or bolster whatever human inputs our students receive." The report highlighted research that indicates that the quality and quantity of light in schools impacts the achievement, health, and behavior of students. Their report also cites studies indicating that airborne pollution and thermal discomforts have negative effects on concentration and attendance; and that noise pollution from the building's systems and poor acoustics in classrooms negatively impact student performance.