MINIGUIDE FOR SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-CENTERED SCHOOLS

Minnesota School Siting Resources

JUNE 2022

MINNESOTA
SAFE ROUTES
TO SCHOOL

Acknowledgments

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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

MINNESOTA SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Table of Contents

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-CENTERED SCHOOLS

Introduction to the Miniguide

School siting matters. Decisions about where to open or close schools and when to rehabilitate existing schools affect communities in many ways. Trends in school siting have led to schools often being located far from where students live. This is due to cheap land costs outside of town, ease of building in undeveloped areas, and an emphasis on large school sites and abundant playing fields. But schools located within neighborhoods are a core community resource.

Community-centered schools support tight-knit communities in which students walk and bike to school, community members use school recreational features on the weekends, and the school serves as a community center for voting or emergency needs. In contrast, a range of problems may plague schools located outside of town. These problems include reduced volunteering and parental involvement, high costs of busing and driving, and limited benefits for the larger community from the enormous financial investment in a school. In addition, recent studies show that passengers are exposed to significant air pollution inside vehicles, meaning that long commutes by car or school bus may worsen asthma and cause other health problems.

It's easy for school siting decisions to focus narrowly on initial cost, ease of development, and desires for expansive school buildings and grounds. But decisions about facilities and siting need to be based upon community values – priorities around community access, walkability, community development, and diverse student bodies. Making sure those values are incorporated into decision making requires persistence, an understanding of the process, and sustained community engagement. This miniguide provides support for decision makers, advocates, and community members who want to influence decisions about facilities decisions, whether those are new schools, school renovations, or school closures.

Each section of the miniguide can be used as a stand alone factsheet or "how to" guide. Together, the sections provide an overview of why these decisions matter, how they work in Minnesota, and how you can get involved in influencing school siting decisions to create better outcomes.

MINIGUIDE GOAL AND OVERVIEW

WHAT IS SCHOOL SITING?

It's easy for school siting decisions to focus narrowly on initial cost, ease of development, and desired school building and grounds characteristics. Making sure that facilities decisions—about renovating, building a new school on a new site, or closing a school—incorporate values around community access, walkability, compact development, and diverse student bodies requires persistence, an understanding of the process, and sustained community engagement. This miniguide provides tools and information for decision-makers, stakeholders, and advocates who want to influence decisions about new schools, school renovations, or school closures.
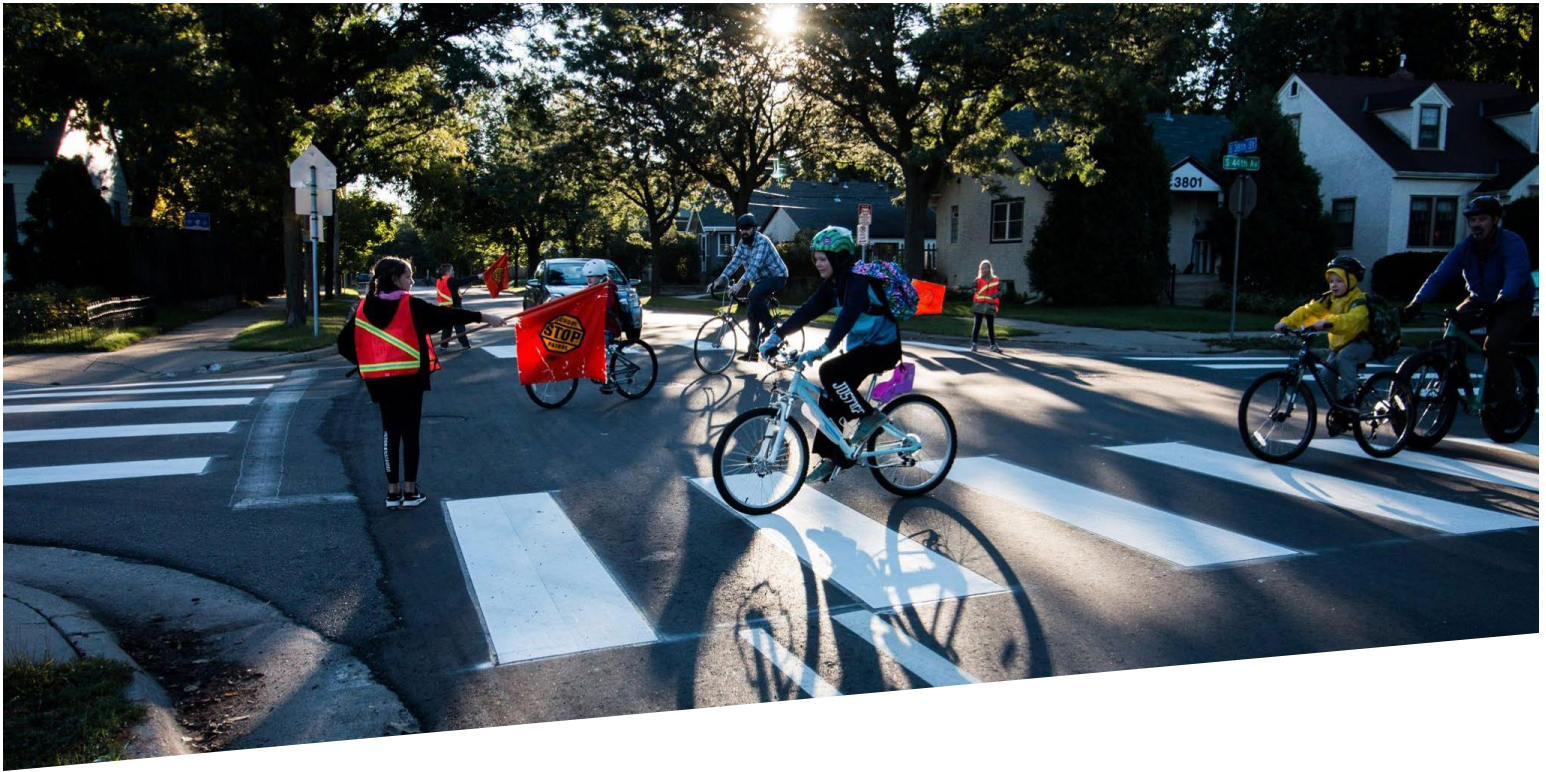
Why Community-Centered Schools?

BENEFITS OF DIVERSE, WALKABLE SCHOOLS

Why do community-centered schools matter? A new or renovated school is a significant long-term community investment. Schools will be in use for 50 years or more. Siting decisions influence the health and routines of students, families, staff, and teachers, as well as transportation patterns and land use in the community as a whole. There are many benefits to community-centered schools, located within neighborhoods, near where students live, and in locations that draw a diverse student body:

- **Student physical activity and health:**
  Less than a quarter of K-12 students in the United States get enough physical activity. Walking or bicycling to school can provide a significant amount of recommended daily physical activity. Students are far more likely to walk and bicycle to school when they live nearer to their school. Community-centered schools mean that more students walk and bike to school, and students are able to play or exercise at school during weekends and summer. Studies show that students who get more physical activity do better academically.

- **Less air pollution:**
  Schools that are located near where students live contribute to lower air pollution levels because they allow more walking and bicycling and fewer vehicle trips. In addition, fewer students may be exposed to idling vehicles, which contribute to asthma and lung disease outcomes. And new research shows that students are exposed to much higher air pollution levels when sitting within a car or school bus as compared to when they're outside a vehicle.

- **Diverse student body:**
  With thoughtful planning, walkable school sites can serve diverse student bodies. Students of all races benefit from more diverse classrooms. Benefits include higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, enhanced inter-group relations, more comfort with peers of diverse backgrounds, and positive long-term life outcomes. Studies find that students in more diverse settings report feeling safer, less bullied, and less lonely.

- **Family involvement:**
  Being closer to school supports higher levels of family involvement in school activities, whether volunteering in the classroom, attending teacher meetings, or participating in PTA meetings or school events. More family involvement benefits students.

- **Community access and use:**
  When a school is located in the heart of a community, students and the community at large can use school grounds after school hours, on weekends, and during the summer for physical activity, sports, or play. Schools located in communities can also function as sites for community meetings, voting, or emergency shelters.

- **Climate change:**
  Transportation is the biggest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Minnesota; recommendations to mitigate transportation-related emissions include more compact development, intermixing residences and destinations (such as schools) near one another, and encouraging walking, bicycling, and transit. School commutes can determine family transportation choices and are a big factor in congestion and driving miles. Siting schools in locations that support climate-friendly travel modes is key to a healthy future.

- **Improved transportation safety:**
  When schools are designed for walking and bicycling, everyone is safer. Schools can be located off of high traffic roads and designed to keep modes separate from each other. In addition, slower road speeds near schools decrease the likelihood of or harm from crashes for students on foot, bicycle, or in a vehicle. Multi-modal school design increases safety for students walking, bicycling, or exiting school buses or personal vehicles.

How School Siting & Construction Work in Minnesota: Overview

How does the school siting process work in Minnesota? To influence decisions, it is necessary to understand the school siting process. Although school siting decisions about new schools, closing schools, and renovating schools can be confusing, the process usually follows these steps:

STEP 1

IDENTIFICATION OF NEED

The first step occurs when the school district identifies a need related to school facilities—crowded schools, deteriorating buildings, or an increase or decrease in student populations. The issue will likely be raised at a school board meeting to gain authorization for the next steps.

STEP 2

INITIAL PLANNING

If the school district decides to go forward, the district will work with a planning or architecture firm to identify project needs and potential sites, as well as to develop a rough design and cost estimate. The district also works with a financial advisor to understand potential property tax impacts and determine a feasible plan for bond needs. At this stage, the district can create a school siting committee to make sure to incorporate needs and considerations from school, city or county, and community partners.

STEP 3

STATE APPROVAL

a. **Submission:** Districts must submit school construction project proposals to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) commissioner for a process called "review and comment" for most large capital projects, with some limited exceptions.

b. **Review:** The MDE commissioner then has 60 days to review the educational and economic advisability of the project under the requirements and guidelines set forth in the Guide for Planning School Construction Projects in Minnesota (School Construction Guide). If the review is:

+ *Positive:* The district may go to the voters for approval of construction financing; the district must get 50 percent voter approval of the proposal to move forward with selling bonds to raise funding.

+ *Unfavorable:* The school board must reconsider the project, and if it wishes to go forward, the district must get 60 percent voter approval of the proposal.

+ *Negative:* The project may not proceed; however, there is a meeting requirement and appeal process.

STEP 4

REFERENDUM

If the project receives a positive or unfavorable review by the MDE commissioner, the district can proceed to the voters for a vote on approving construction financing, known as a referendum on bond financing. Note that the referendum question usually simply asks the voters to decide whether to authorize bonds for school construction, and does not limit the use of the funding to a given plan or site.

STEP 5

DESIGN

If the voters approve the referendum, the construction bonds can be issued, and the formal design process begins. The bond funding can be used to purchase the site and for other school construction purposes. The formal design process involves detailed architectural design of the building or buildings, and also involves design of the site, including determinations that will affect school transportation and integration into the community. The district and its consultants may convene a site design committee to provide input into questions around school entrances and neighborhood access, walkways, vehicle parking and circulation, bicycle parking and movements, and more.

STEP 6

CONSTRUCTION

Following design, construction can begin. Construction contracts must be awarded within two years of approval or the review and comment becomes invalid.

Hosting a Community School Siting Meeting

Community meetings are a great way to explore and identify key community values to inform school siting determinations. Community engagement, such as holding school siting community meetings, provides community members with a voice in school siting decisions and ensures that communities receive the benefits of community-centered schools.

WHY HOST A COMMUNITY SCHOOL SITING MEETING?

When community members understand the need for new or renovated school facilities, weigh in on their hopes and fears, and see their visions considered and represented, they feel invested in school siting decisions. This increases community support for financing measures and for local schools more generally. A community meeting can also be a good way to identify potential members for a site selection committee.

WHEN SHOULD A COMMUNITY SCHOOL SITING MEETING TAKE PLACE?

Although a community meeting can be useful at any point in the school siting and facilities planning process, holding a community meeting early on, while sites are first being identified and explored, has the greatest potential to influence school siting decisions. Districts sometimes hold off on community meetings at this stage. Districts may wait to go public until everything is lined up in order to reduce complexity and avoid driving up the cost of potential sites. A public meeting may not be a good place to debate the pros and cons of specific sites, but a meeting at this stage can build community support and determine community priorities, which can then inform site selection.

WHO CAN HOST A COMMUNITY SCHOOL SITING MEETING?

Any local stakeholders can host a community school siting meeting. The meeting will have a different flavor and different official impact if it is hosted by the school district and its consultants as compared to if it is hosted by a parent teacher association, Safe Routes to School task force, or other local advocates and community members. However, any of these hosts can create a constructive and influential meeting. Regardless of who hosts, all of these groups should be included in the meeting.

WHAT IS REQUIRED TO HOST A MEETING?

Hosting a community meeting can be simple or highly involved. Think through how you will approach the following steps:

- **Talk to key parties:**
  Be sure that you have reached out to key decision makers, potential speakers, and other interested groups early on. Core parties include: the school district superintendent, facilities staff, board members, city or county planning staff, city or county elected officials, neighborhood associations, school community members, and more. They may have important suggestions around timing, outreach, and framing. They may want to co-host the event, join the project management team, or speak at the meeting. Sharing materials on the benefits of community-centered schools may be helpful in convincing these groups that the meeting and issue matter.

- **Create a meeting project management team:**
  Convene a small team with two to five members to

plan, organize, and carry out the tasks necessary for a successful meeting. Include members with experience conducting inclusive community engagement to assist in designing an event that is appealing and accessible for diverse participants.

- **Select a time, venue, & features:**
  In consultation with partners, determine when and where to hold the meeting to maximize participation. Consider whether to hold the meeting in person, using remote meeting technology, or both. Think about what time and location will make your meeting accessible to community members and key participants. Bringing meetings to locations that are convenient for different demographic groups and community members is key for attendance. Assess community language needs and provide an interpreter and appropriate translation equipment where needed to support engagement by all community members. For example, providing childcare and food can make attendance more feasible for stretched families and community members.

- **Conduct broad outreach:**
  Engage in broad outreach to different community groups and other interested parties. Seek out local knowledge and contacts (cultural, neighborhood and business) to collaborate and better serve community members. Consider whether you can collaborate with trusted local individuals and organizations who can engage and invite a range of different demographic groups from the community, such as tribal groups, different racial or religious groups, neighborhood associations, and so on.

Consider creating other means for community members to weigh in if they are unable to join the meeting, such as a survey, written input, etc.

- **Set an agenda:**
  Determine an agenda, secure speakers, and plan activities and timing. You can get started by tailoring to your needs the sample agenda, powerpoint, talking points, and group activity included in this document. Test equipment and practice using it to reduce the likelihood of mishaps and malfunctions. Decide whether to record the event and make it available to those who cannot attend.

- **Assemble the necessary materials:**
  For an in person meeting, various materials may assist with the meeting and with engagement activities. Consult the meeting materials list in this document for an overview of basic equipment, sign-in materials, group exercise materials, and optional items like food and beverages. Fewer materials are required for a remote meeting; those that are required should be provided ahead of time.

- **Hold the meeting & conduct follow up:**
  Arrive early to set up the room or space and to double-check equipment. Collect contact information for attendees so that you can follow up with them later. After the meeting, thank the speakers and give attendees a chance to give feedback on the meeting or share additional thoughts. Follow up on any actions that were committed to or identified in the course of the meeting, such as forming a site selection committee or setting out site selection considerations.

For more resources and recommendations on hosting a community meeting in support of community-centered schools, see the accompanying resource toolkit Hosting a Community Meeting on School Siting: Meeting in a Box. The toolkit includes a sample meeting agenda, materials list, slides, and more.

Forming, Joining, and Informing a Site Selection Committee

Creating a small site selection committee that includes a limited number of community stakeholders is a best practice for Minnesota school districts engaged in school siting decisions, whether those decisions involve building, renovating, or closing schools.

HOW DOES A SITE SELECTION COMMITTEE HELP THE PROCESS?

School siting requires that a school district engage in a challenging balance. On the one hand, the school siting process cannot be an open community discussion, since that would drive land prices up and might create controversy or become unmanageable. On the other hand, without community input into site selection, the district may misjudge what the community wants. That may lead to a lack of community support, an inability to obtain construction financing, or poor outcomes from a site that worsens congestion and harms quality of life.

Creating a small site selection committee avoids both of these hazards. The committee should include key partners from the district, the local jurisdiction, and the community. The business of the committee should

be conducted with the goal of making the best decision about the school site, without conflicts of interest. The recommendations of the committee should be considered and acted upon by the school board and superintendent.

WHO SHOULD BE ON THE SITE SELECTION COMMITTEE?

A site selection committee is composed of key personnel from the district. Depending on the size and priorities of the district and the significance of the project, district personnel may include the superintendent and board members, the facilities director, and affected principals. Alternately, personnel may comprise fewer high-level decision makers and more facilities staff. In addition, a city or county planner or other representatives of the local jurisdiction or jurisdictions should participate. Community members should also be included. Community members could include representatives from affected neighborhoods or neighborhood associations, families of current students, students themselves, a Safe Routes to School practitioner, afterschool program administrators, and other nonprofit or community association staff. The diversity and degree to which the committee is representative of the community should be considered.

WHAT ARE COMMITTEE RESPONSIBILITIES?

Building off of site selection priorities that may have been developed through a community school siting meeting or other engagement activities, the committee should develop site selection criteria. If no community engagement process has occurred, the committee may want to coordinate an engagement process to get community input into site selection criteria.

Developing site selection criteria—which may include cost, walkability, ease of construction, proximity to residential areas allowing a diverse student body, and so on—allows a values-based comparison of the pros and cons of proposed sites, including existing sites. Sites also need to provide for students' safety from physical hazards and environmental dangers, such as proximity to busy streets or freeways, warehouses or other industries that see heavy truck traffic, dangerous street or railroad crossings, flood zones, or sites that may be polluted with toxic contaminants. The committee also needs information about key programming needs for the proposed facility and about cost constraints related to feasible bond size.

The committee then methodically compares each site. Based upon this comparison and group discussion, the committee should develop recommendations and justifications for preferred sites.

HOW TO FORM, JOIN, OR INFLUENCE A SITE SELECTION COMMITTEE?

GETTING INVOLVED:

- If no site selection committee exists, meet with the superintendent or facilities director to discuss the benefits of creating such a committee.

- If a committee is being formed, ask to join it, or use relationships with school board members or other influential participants to have your name put forward.

- If a committee has formed but you are not on it, meet with individual committee members to convey your priorities. Ask if a community engagement process is planned, and volunteer to assist with such a process, or collect community feedback on your own, and provide that to the committee.

Influencing Site Design

Once a school construction project is approved and financed and the site is acquired, the next step is the design of the building and grounds. Site design provides a key opportunity to make sure that a new or renovated school supports student health and a vibrant community.

Site design is essential to whether a new school is easily accessible from a nearby neighborhood or requires a lengthy detour out to main arterials by car. Site design also determines whether there is accessible and secure bike parking, whether cars are separated from students walking and biking, and whether safety and convenience for walking and biking are integrated into the school overall.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The site design process usually takes place once site selection, state approvals, and financing are in place. In contrast to site selection, site design is generally more open to community input. It is common for Safe Routes to School professionals and other community members to have the opportunity to join site design committees. To get involved:

- **Join the Site Design Committee:**
  The most time consuming but most effective method is likely to join the site design committee. This will give you the most direct opportunity to advocate for designs that support walking and bicycling and to address oversights in the process.

- **Participate in Community Meetings:**
  The district and its planners and architects will often hold community engagement meetings or provide other ways to get community input. Attend an in person or virtual meeting to weigh in.

- **Comment in Writing:** Community members can submit a letter or comments describing their goals and requests for site design.

- **Coordinate One-on-One Meetings:**
  You can set up meetings to talk one-on-one with key decision makers, such as the superintendent, the district facilities director, site design committee members, or school board members to explain what is necessary to support walking, biking, and a community-centered school.

WHAT TO ENCOURAGE IN SITE DESIGN

SAFE AND CONVENIENT WALKING AND BIKING FACILITIES

- Have sidewalks, pathways, and bike facilities that fully connect exterior sidewalks or other locations to school entrances. Make sure pathways are direct and do not require people to cross dangerous areas or interact with motor vehicles.

- Locate driveways and parking lots away from the natural routes that people on foot or bicycle are likely to take. Avoid creating conflicts between the natural tendencies of people walking and bicycling to use direct routes and the rules for how they should travel.

- Have the school entrance face the community and be welcoming to students and others arriving on foot or bicycle, rather than having the entrance turned inward and primarily accessible from a parking lot.

- Provide a bike path that students can take all the way to bicycle parking. Don't require students to get off and walk bikes—that is inconvenient and creates the potential for conflicts with other travel modes.

- To encourage bicycling and discourage theft, locate bicycle parking in a prominent place, easily accessible from school buildings and entryways, and within eyesight of administrative offices or heavily trafficked areas. Provide covered bike parking so that biking is still convenient when there is rain or snow.

- Ensure that walking and biking pathways have pedestrian-oriented lights to ensure safety and comfort on stormy days or during early or late dark hours.

- Consider designing blacktop areas for walking and biking education. Elementary schools often benefit from traffic gardens, where students can play and also learn traffic safety.

SEPARATE MODES

- The biggest danger to students on foot, bicycle, or getting off of school buses is from motor vehicles.

- Keep the modes separate from each other, with drop offs and parking located away from school buses, public transportation, walking, and biking. Be sure that each mode has a safe path onto or across school grounds; use physical barriers and design to keep modes separate.

- Provide prominent signage to avoid confusion about where each mode should go.

DESIGN VEHICLE ACCESS TO ENSURE SLOW SPEEDS AND FEW CONFLICTS

- Avoid wide driveways and turning radii in order to ensure slow speeds.

- Ensure that any crossings have high-visibility crosswalk treatments (striping, bumpouts, flashing lights, etc.) and appropriate school signage.

- Keep vehicle and bus drop off areas away from school buildings or areas where students congregate

to protect students from exposure to tailpipe fumes; if drop off areas are located at a distance from buildings and entry points, students can benefit from a short walk from drop off areas to school.

CONNECT THE CAMPUS TO THE COMMUNITY

- Ensure that walking or bicycling students can conveniently access the campus from nearby neighborhoods or developments, as well as from before and after school destinations such as community centers, libraries, and corner stores. Create multiple access points into school grounds for students on foot or bicycle to increase convenience and decrease congestion.

- Provide walking and biking access to locations that students or staff may access before or after school—nearby libraries, parks, community centers, commercial areas, and neighborhoods—and ensure there are safe pathways and crossings.

Making Lasting Change: Embedding Commitment to Community-Centered Schools in Plans & Policies

For students and communities to receive the benefits of community-centered schools, it is important to not only focus on particular school siting decisions, but also to influence the larger plans and policies that influence school siting processes. These policies and plans can include a commitment to community-centered schools, can eliminate or reduce barriers that may prevent schools from being located near where students live, and can create incentives or support for healthy school siting determinations.

OPPORTUNITIES AT THE SCHOOL DISTRICT LEVEL

DISTRICT POLICIES

School district policies are official policies adopted by a district's school board. These policies guide and direct relevant actions taken by district personnel. Many school districts do not have any policies that address school siting. In the absence of such policies, decisions about new school locations, school closures, and related matters often take place in an ad hoc fashion. This can mean that key considerations may be absent from discussion, which can lead to uncoordinated long-term planning, resulting in missed opportunities and a failure to obtain the benefits of community-centered schools for students and communities. With encouragement from advocates, school boards can tailor and adopt model school siting policies, such as those developed by ChangeLab Solutions, to address these issues.
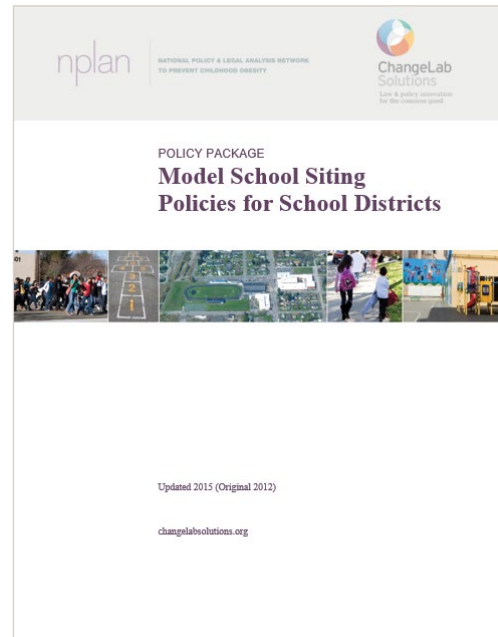
Cover of "Model School Siting Policies for School Districts." Developed by ChangeLab Solutions.

LONG TERM FACILITIES PLAN

Incentives in Minnesota law mean that most districts have long-term facilities plans adopted by the school board and approved by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) commissioner. These ten-year facility plans must consider facilities maintenance needs, and can also include program or enrollment changes necessitating that new facilities be built or existing ones be renovated or closed. Districts must update plans annually and resubmit them to MDE. Facilities planning processes are a key opportunity for community involvement and input. Long-term facilities plans can express community commitments to walkable, diverse, community-centered schools.

OPPORTUNITIES AT THE STATE LEVEL

REVISIONS TO MDE'S SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION GUIDE

MDE's School Construction Guide provides detailed guidelines regarding factors that districts are encouraged to consider in designing school buildings and sites. Although the School Construction Guide is not a law or formal rule, it is closely followed by districts to ensure that they receive a positive finding when the MDE commissioner reviews submitted projects. However, the current School Construction Guide contains a variety of guidelines that can serve as barriers to community-centered schools. Examples include:

Minnesota's School Construction Guide includes minimum school site acreage guidelines that are the largest in the nation. Although these guidelines are not mandatory, they create a strong pressure to locate schools far from where students live.

- **Excessive minimum acreage guidelines:** The Guide provides minimum acreage guidelines (school lot size recommendations) that are the largest in the nation.
- **Failure to encourage walking or bicycling infrastructure:** Failure to encourage safe walkways or bicycle parking as key design components.
- **Language discouraging renovation:** Support for new construction over renovation.

With minor revisions, the School Construction Guide could retain its many strong recommendations while adding more support for and emphasis on walkable, bikeable, community-centered schools. One key improvement would be to **Provide different minimum acreage guidelines for schools in different settings.** Acreage guidelines could be smaller for schools in urban areas or in rural town centers, but larger for schools in suburban areas or new developments.

Additional Resources

TOOLS AND MODEL POLICIES

School Siting Infographic | Georgia Conservancy

School Siting Workshop Templates | Georgia Conservancy

School Siting Model Policies & Resources | ChangeLab Solution

Active School Neighborhood Checklist | Arizona's DOT (*this checklist is very useful for site selection, but it is no longer fully supported and the interactive features are no longer available*)

School Siting Tools For Districts | Environmental Protection Agency

Safe Routes to School Local Policy Guide | Safe Routes Partnership

School Siting in Minnesota: Process & Considerations

BACKGROUND RESOURCES ON COMMUNITY-CENTERED SCHOOLS

Voluntary School Siting Guidelines | Environmental Protection Agency

Helping Johnny Walk to School | National Trust for Historic Preservation

WALKABILITY & DIVERSITY

White Paper: Maximizing Walkability, Diversity and Equity in U.S. Schools | ChangeLab Solutions, PolicyLink & Safe Routes Partnership

SCHOOL SITE DESIGN

Keep Calm and Carry On to School: Improving Arrival and Dismissal for Walking and Biking | Safe Routes Partnership

Traffic Playground Toolkit | Oregon Metro

Walk to school? But how do I find the front door? Strategies for designing a walkable school campus | Walk Boston

Best Practices for School Traffic Design: A Construction and Renovation Guide for Seattle Public Schools | City of Seattle School Traffic Safety Committee

Improve Your School Arrival and Departure Procedures: A Toolkit for School Safety Committees | Feet First

RESEARCH

School Siting: Contested Visions of the Community School | Noreen C. McDonald

MINNESOTA RESOURCES

Guide for Planning School Construction Projects in Minnesota (School Construction Guide) | Minnesota Dept of Education

Building Healthy Schools: Health Impact Assessment on Planning School Construction Projects in Minnesota | Public Health Law Center