

Building Schools and Community

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As the landscapes of our cities evolve, school buildings remain a constant. Desperately in need of repair, modernization, and beautification, especially in the urban areas, schools are frequently called upon to provide essential support services for the families and communities of the children they serve. To meet the new dual demands of education and social service programming, urban school districts are beginning to invest in neighborhood revitalization and modernizing school facilities.

School facility capital spending is a form of place-based community investment, so it's not surprising to see school investment goals coalesce with city redevelopment and planning goals. Stakeholders in school facilities and program planning now include city officials, social service providers, and community residents, in addition to the parents, teachers, administrators, and students. These coalitions are formalized in some places and work in tandem without any institutionalized commitment, in others.

Such collaborations between public institutions are notable, as historically, school districts and city governments have often had antagonistic relationships. Furthermore, the process of participatory visioning and planning used in these projects represents a transformative moment in governance for both institutions. The result has been a nationwide emergence of a move towards "community-centered schools" that are more intimately connected to their physical surroundings and local communities.

Building Schools for the Whole Community

School districts, often perceived as isolated and bureaucratic entities, are forging partnerships, policies, and processes to revitalize or plan new school buildings that are more open, participatory, and often characterized by nontraditional school designs, such as joint use recreation and community service facilities, adaptive re-use of non-school buildings, and schools built on urban infill sites. The planning and construction of public school facilities is moving away from the 1950s industrial model towards one that integrates community services with educational programming.

Joint use schools, which first emerged in the 1990s, are schools that share one or more of their spaces with another public entity or community-based organization. Sometimes called "full service schools," the advantages they offer their communities include:

- Services, such as on-site health clinics, counseling offices, recreation opportunities, and financial literacy information.
- Amenities, such as swimming pools, libraries, and computer labs.
- Savings on costs of construction and maintenance.

By bringing the benefits of recreational and health services to the broader community of residents, these multifaceted facilities expand the definition of "school stakeholder" beyond students and their caregivers. In other words, joint use developments can increase parental participation, raise general community support of schools, and provide new or improved infrastructure in the urban landscape, contributing to the beautification, safety, and vibrancy of our cities.

Community Integrated School Buildings

The new Helms Middle School building currently under construction in the City of San Pablo in the Bay Area, has evolved out of more than 10 years of work grounded in comprehensive programming and service provision. In 1994, the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) administration, as well as several elementary and middle school principals applied for a Healthy Start grant from the California State Department of Education. Among the schools selected to receive startup money to build a

small learning center that included community services was Helms Middle School in San Pablo. Out of this funding emerged the Helms Community Project (HCP)—a school-community collaborative comprised of district and school staff, community-based mental health service providers, parents, and community members—and a partnership aimed at supporting the academic successes of the schoolchildren and their families.

Since its initial funding, the project has expanded to offer a growing list of programs that are a working example of how seemingly separate services can be integrated when housed in the same physical space. A student referred for counseling may receive a weekly appointment with an on-site therapist and/or be connected with a mentor or healthcare provider, recommended to participate in an after-school program, have his/her parents called in for an academic/behavioral appointment, and/or receive a home visit by an HCP parental outreach staff. Most importantly, having all of these resources housed in the Helms Middle School has made them easily accessible to the students and their families.

Although students are the core constituency of this school-community collaborative, they are not the only beneficiaries of HCP's extensive programming. LaZena Jones, director of HCP, says that the project often functions as the eyes of the community. The staff has worked to familiarize faculty with the lifestyles of their students, the challenges they face in their communities, and the impacts on their academic experience. One recent example of such an effort was a school-wide community-mapping project for which the Helms faculty, staff, administration, and community members walked around the school neighborhoods, identifying challenges and assets. Such interventions enable teachers, parents, and community to develop the empathy needed to support students from a variety of perspectives and represent the school's holistic approach to education.

City Council Member Genoveva Calloway calls Helms Middle School a mini-replica of San Pablo for the wide-ranging and integrative services offered by HCP. Recently, the City of San Pablo has begun to formalize its collaborative efforts with HCP. Vice Mayor Leonard McNeil is also one of HCP's consis-

tent champions. In recent years, the city has done everything from co-writing grants with the School District, to matching grant monies, to earmarking city funds for after-school academic enrichment programs, demonstrating that education is not just the bailiwick of school districts, but rather, a community's shared responsibility.

With the new partnerships and processes at hand, the city now excitedly awaits the construction of the new Helms Middle School facility (funded by a bond secured by the WCCUSD in 2002), which will include San Pablo's Community Center building—funded, in turn, by the city and situated on land granted by the school district. Now referred to as San Pablo's Center of Community, the center is the product of a 10-year program needs assessment conducted among school service providers and stakeholders under the direction of former Principal Harriet McLean and with the collaboration of the city and the Helms Project. The resulting facility is designed to enable small learning communities to function within the larger school and also to include space for community service providers to work.

Currently, the City of San Pablo, HCP, and the WCCUSD participate in the PLUS (Planning and Learning United for Systems change) Leadership Initiative of the Center for Cities and Schools at the University of California, Berkeley. Since last summer, the PLUS team has worked to institutionalize HCP partnerships that have been established over the years. Ultimately, the PLUS team hopes, the physical presence and ongoing utilization of the Center of Community will serve as a beacon of their vision of a transformative collaboration between school and community, in addition to being a landmark in the urban fabric of San Pablo.

Centers of Community Life, Emeryville

A few miles south of San Pablo, down San Pablo Avenue, the Emery Unified School District (EUSD) and the City of Emeryville have been cultivating their own vision for connecting community and educational programming. In this 1.2 square mile city, the school district, the city government, community members, and local businesses have been working together for seven years to craft a redevelopment plan

that puts education for everyone at the center of community life in Emeryville. This vision of supportive services and high quality education is coupled with the creation of public spaces and buildings built to foster and enhance a collective learning environment. As school board member Josh Simon puts it, “We don’t want to just build the Center of Community Life. We want to be the center of community life and then build a building around what we are.”

In 2001, following poor student performance and an impending fiscal crisis, EUSD was taken over by a state administrator, setting in motion a series of changes, which included the election of an entirely new school board whose members were keen on rethinking the school-community connection. A broad coalition of stakeholders—made up of city officials and staff, school district representatives, teachers, residents, and other community members—came together under the Emery Youth Services Advisory Committee (EYSAC) to craft a vision for turning the schools around. In 2002, it was recommended that the city and district work together to redevelop the schools and other city parcels into a vibrant, mixed-use community center to serve all the people of Emeryville and the idea for Emeryville’s Center of Community Life was born.

The Center was originally envisioned as a multi-acre site, consisting of new “green” school facilities, community health and service support centers, joint use recreation facilities, business and retail facilities, a fire or police station, and some mixed-income housing—to create a place that is diverse, vibrant, and a “center of community.” Also in 2002, influential business leaders and the Chamber of Commerce publicly supported a successful parcel tax vote to raise desperately needed money for the school district. Then again, in November 2007, Measure A—another parcel tax increase—passed with an overwhelming majority, thanks to a concerted “get out the vote” effort by city officials, business leaders, community members, and students.

At this moment, Emeryville’s many stakeholders are in discussion to plan and create not one, but many smaller Centers of Community Life. The district is currently engaged in renovating the elementary

school and is working on plans for a Family and Community Wellness Center located at the Emery Secondary School campus. The design and development of the Center will include input not only from school district and city staff, but also from young people and their families. The Y-PLAN, an initiative of the Center for Cities and Schools at the University of California, Berkeley, which partners university student mentors with high school students to work on local community planning projects, will work with Emery Secondary students this year on the Family and Community Wellness Center, slated to open in September 2008. As Roy Miller, the architect working for EUSD, says, “The Wellness Center is not the final piece. It’s another learning increment—we are taking on a piece that we are able to tackle and accomplish. It’s simply another step in the evolution of this process. And that’s the truth of change—there is no final end point. Rather, we are just taking steps, putting them in place, learning, and then doing it all again.”

In other words, the ultimate hope of the city of Emeryville is that the physical infrastructure, along with the services and activities it offers, will serve as a catalyst for productive and supportive cross-cultural, inter-racial, and intergenerational interactions.

An Endless Loop of Possibilities

The two innovative joint use school projects featured here, in many ways, embody the potential of new and rehabilitated school buildings to manifest the collaborative work of two important public institutions—school districts and city governments. Beyond that, they represent the shared vision cultivated by parents, students, teachers, and other community members. Schools no longer need to be built as traditional stand-alone facilities that are open only during school hours; rather, they can be designed and built to be community centers that offer services and amenities to local neighborhoods. As San Pablo and Emeryville show us, joint use facilities are not merely an end point of a long collaborative, but also a part of structuring the process of building mutually beneficial partnerships across public agencies, community-based organizations, parents, students, teachers, residents, and other community members. ■

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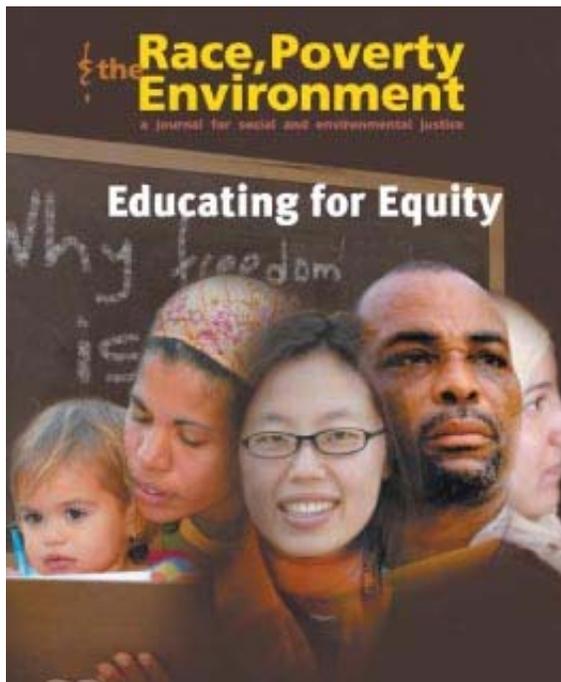
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