



MOVE MORE NORTH CAROLINA:

A Guide to School Siting



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School siting is the process used by school boards and municipalities to decide where to locate new schools. **This guide is for anyone who wants to get involved in a school district's school siting process.**

School siting decisions can increase opportunities for children to be more active; create healthier, walkable communities; and develop stronger connections between schools and neighborhoods. Site selection is influenced by several factors including the amount of time required to plan and build the school, the projected district demographic trends, the availability of public funds to construct the school, and the availability of land.¹

There are many benefits to locating schools close to the homes of the students they serve.

- Students can walk or bike to and from school.
- Children are more likely to use school playgrounds on weekends and during vacation time.
- Parents and students can participate in more activities at the school outside school hours.
- Less driving time to transport students means less air pollution and reduced traffic.

A school that serves as a center for the community benefits the community in the following ways:

- Boosts property values
- Provides a safe and accessible space for adult classes, voting or other services
- Offers the opportunity to develop deeper connections between the school and community members, including those who may not attend the school
- Creates a greater sense that the school belongs to the entire community

An increase in walking and biking as a means of transportation (active transportation) results in more physical activity and lower transportation costs.

Active Transportation Trends

Transportation trend data indicates that the number of students who walk or bike to school has been declining. From 1995 to 2009 the percentage of students being driven to school increased while the number of students walking decreased. At the same time, the percentage of students who live within a mile of their school decreased.²

Transportation Costs

The declining number of students who walk and bike to school contributes to the rising cost of transporting students. The average cost of bus transportation almost doubled from 1980 to 2013.³ Other costs created by automobile-centered school transportation include public costs such as road maintenance, private costs of vehicle ownership and operation, and increases in air pollution, noise and congestion on the road network.⁴

Physical Activity Opportunities

The US has seen a threefold increase in the rates of childhood obesity in the last 30 years.⁵ Currently, fewer than a quarter of school-age children meet the daily recommended physical activity of 60 minutes per day.⁵ Walking and biking to school helps students meet the recommended 60 minutes of activity per day. Students who regularly walk or bike to school are more likely to reach the recommended daily amount of physical activity and have higher levels of physical activity throughout the day. Walking one mile to and from school each day will give a child two-thirds of the recommendation.⁶

Distance is the top reason parents cited for not allowing their children to walk or bike to school (72%). This is followed by amount of traffic, speed of traffic, and safety of intersections and crossings.⁸

Why Get Involved?

Too often decisions made for school siting occur in isolation with little input from community members. A planning process that includes significant public input helps incorporate specific community goals.⁷ Greater participation by the community can encourage school districts to site and build schools that allow for more active travel to school and better use as community centers. Public schools are community resources financed by public tax dollars. All citizens have a stake in how those schools benefit and serve their community and should have input in where schools are located.

Participation in school siting can occur in public meetings and through public comment before sites are selected. Interactive meetings help community members better communicate their desires and allow for visualization of how a school site integrates into neighborhoods.

How to Get Involved

For Members of the Community

- Attend a school board meeting and ask your school district staff to ensure that public participation is a core component of the planning process. Community member voices can help ensure that school site selection and design will meet the needs of the community.
- Discuss the location of the school in relation to where students live when communicating with the school board and local decision makers. This will help identify potential active routes to school and help to advocate for a school accessible on foot or by bike.
- Consider the policies and suggestions below to use as talking points.

For Planners

- Keep communication open with the school board members to inform them of long-range planning that includes sites for schools.
- Ensure that any planning for school siting includes public involvement, including representation from diverse backgrounds.
- Point out areas of potential population growth or decline. Cities and counties are required to plan for population changes for the next 20 years. A discussion of the jurisdiction's long-range plans will help school districts know where to secure land for the future.
- Identify vacant land and discuss attributes. Most communities have an up-to-date computer database of vacant land that includes important characteristics such as size of site, type of zoning, and presence of wetlands, floodplains and environmentally sensitive areas. Access to these data streamlines and better informs the process.
- Discuss joint, shared, or open use potentials and other facilities a school should be near. If asked, the city or county might be willing to jointly purchase land with the school district to co-locate facilities such as a park or a community center. City or county officials should also discuss with the school district the overall vision for the community and identify how schools contribute to that vision through strategic planning.

For County Officials

- Support coordinated planning between city or county staff and local school districts.
- Schedule regular meetings with school superintendents and facility planning staff.
- Consider coordinating ballot measures.
- Provide time on the agenda during planning commission and city council or county commission meetings for school district presentations.
- Adopt policies that encourage community-centered schools.
- Include long-term plans for school facilities into comprehensive plans.



More than 60% of parents surveyed reported living more than one mile from school.⁸

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Policies and Considerations in School Siting

1. **Ensure the school siting process involves stakeholders from throughout the community.**

The location of the school affects the whole community, and a school that is accessible with facilities available for community use has the potential to provide great benefits. A process that includes local planners, representatives from the school, school board members, parents and community members will encourage collaboration.

2. **Site schools where students can easily access them by foot or bike.**

Identifying locations for schools should take into account where students live. By siting schools near students' homes, it will be feasible for them to walk or bike to school.

3. **Plan for health.**

School siting and planning the school facilities should include a focus on physical activity. Schools located centrally in a community encourage an active route to school. Where this is not possible, school plans should include space that encourages physical activity, such as walking tracks, fields or playgrounds.

4. **Include safe infrastructure for walking and biking to school and for access to the school.**

A school located in close proximity to a residential area must include walking and biking infrastructure to ensure that the route to school is safe. This includes access from the street to the school that keeps students safe from vehicles during pick up and drop off.

5. **Allow for community use of school facilities.**

Through central siting and joint or shared use agreements, school facilities can serve as recreational locations that benefit the community. Planning should consider how the community might use school property outside school hours and ensure that the grounds are accessible to the community.

RESOURCES

For more information on school siting, visit www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/schoolsiting

NORTH CAROLINA INTERAGENCY SCHOOL SITING WORKGROUP

Olivia Collier, Appalachian Regional Commission,
Program Manager
NC Department of Commerce

Ellen Essick, Section Chief
Healthy Schools Section
NC Department of Public Instruction

Dave Gardner, Worksite Wellness
and School Coordinator
Community and Clinical Connections
for Prevention and Health Branch
NC Division of Public Health

Stephen Heiny, Project Coordinator
National Center for Safe Routes to School

Chris Hilt, President
CLH Design, p.a.

Burt Jenkins, Healthful Living/Athletics Consultant
Healthy Schools Section
NC Department of Public Instruction

Ed Johnson, Safe Routes to School Coordinator
Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation
NC Department of Transportation

Mary Bea Kolbe, Healthy Eating
and Active Living Coordinator
Community and Clinical Connections
for Prevention and Health Branch
NC Division of Public Health

Nathan Maune, Architect
School Planning Section
NC Department of Public Instruction

Cathy Thomas, Branch Head
Community and Clinical Connections
for Prevention and Health Branch
NC Division of Public Health

Suggested citation: Eat Smart, Move More North Carolina. 2018. *Move More North Carolina: A Guide to School Siting*. Raleigh, North Carolina.

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