Prevention Alliance

POLICY BRIEF: SCHOOL SITING

November 2016

GOAL: To protect policies that encourage schools to be built close to the community they serve in order to improve access to active routes for students, such as walking and biking to school.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Not long ago, walking or biking to school was fairly common. In 1969 approximately 48% of children in the U.S. usually walked or biked to school. That number has dropped to a mere 13%[1] nationwide and approximately 15.5%[2] in Washington State. During the same period, we have seen a dramatic increase in childhood obesity with 5-7% of children being obese in the 1960s[3] and approximately 18% being obese in 2012.[4] Our children are getting in the car and bus more, which translates to less daily physical activity, and it is having a negative impact on their health. There are many contributing factors as to why children are walking and biking to school less including safety, traffic, and weather. However, according to a nationwide survey conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the largest percentage of parents (61.5%) cited distance to school as a barrier that prevents them from allowing their kids to walk to school.[5] This barrier is reflected in Washington state: when children live within one mile of school they are much more likely to walk (39%) and bike (3%).[6]

The way we build schools has changed over the past century. There used to be neighborhood area schools that served fewer students who lived closer in proximity. In 1930 there were 262,000 schools that served 28 million students in the United States. Today there are only 91,000 schools serving 53.5 million students.[7] In order to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale, we are building larger schools that serve broader communities. This often results in schools being located further away from the families they serve. However, there are policy options that can help minimize this trend and keep schools within walking and biking distance to as many students and families as possible. One of the main policy tools that can impact the

[1] 2011, National Center for Safe Routes to School. *How Children Get to School: School Travel Patterns from 1969 to 2009.* http://saferoutesinfo.org/sites/default/files/resources/NHTS_school_travel_report_2011_0.pdf
[2] 2015, *WA State Student Travel Survey State Report,* https://www.wsdot.wa.gov/NR/rdonlyres/FB626959-DF52-4045-A793-F6FC22ACD7AD/0/STSReport2014Final.pdf
[3] July 2012, Suzanne Bennett Johnson. *The Nation's Childhood Obesity Epidemic: Health Disparities in the making.* http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2012/07/childhood-obesity.aspx
[4] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Childhood Obesity Facts.* *http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm*
[5] Safe Routes to School Guide. *The Decline of Walking and Bicycling.* http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/introduction/the_decline_of_walking_and_bicycling.cfm
[6] 2015, *WA State Student Travel Survey State Report,* https://www.wsdot.wa.gov/NR/rdonlyres/FB626959-DF52-4045-A793-F6FC22ACD7AD/0/STSReport2014Final.pdf
[7] Safe Routes to School National Partnership. *School Siting: Location Affects the Potential to Walk or Bike.* http://saferoutespartnership.org/state/bestpractices/schoolsiting

accessibility of schools is school siting, which involves establishing rules concerning where a school can and cannot be physically located in relation to the community it serves.

VALUES STATEMENT

The negative health impacts that result from childhood obesity are numerous. Obese children are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, abnormal glucose tolerance, and low self-esteem as a result of social discrimination. They also are more likely to become obese as adults, which can lead to many health problems including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, asthma, and sleep apnea.[8] When children are able to walk and bike to school, there is increased opportunity for daily physical activity – a key tool in preventing childhood obesity. Because they often arrive to school more alert and ready to learn, walking to school generates positive education outcomes as well. They have better attendance, better academic performance, and better concentration in the classroom.[9] Ensuring schools are sited in locations that are a reasonable distance from as much of the student population as possible is one of the most effective ways to increase accessibility by active means.

In addition to improving accessibility via walking and biking to school, when a school is located closer to the community it serves, there is more opportunity for joint use agreements: the use of playgrounds, tracks, and other athletic facilities outside of normal school hours such as after school and weekends. This provides both adults and children increased access to physical activity. School siting policies present an opportunity to promote active living habits throughout a community, especially amongst children.

Other negative health impacts that result from moving schools further away from the students they serve include an increase in traffic congestion and collisions. As much as 20% to 30% of morning rush hour traffic is due to parents driving their children to school.[10] This results in higher levels of air pollution which puts kids at an increased risk of having asthma. With more cars on the road, there is also increased danger of school-aged pedestrian injuries. When schools are located closer to the families they serve more students could walk or bike to school, which would likely result in fewer cars on the road and a reduced risk for asthma and pedestrian collisions.

BACKGROUND ON SCHOOL SITING IN WASHINGTON

While building schools as close as possible to the communities they serve has clear health benefits, it is a complex issue with many different stakeholders, including school districts, cities, counties, active transportation advocates, health advocates, and environmentalists.

[8] Let's Move. *Health Problems and Childhood Obesity*. http://www.letsmove.gov/health-problems-and-childhood-obesity

[9] Getting Results: Safe Routes to School Increasing Walking and Bicycling to School Safely, http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/NR/rdonlyres/441BD4EC-82BD-4E98-B0BF-8551E66638A7/0/SRTStabloid.pdf

[10] Safe Routes to School: A Primer to Understanding the Role of the Student Transportation Department, http://saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Primer-to-Understanding-the-Role-of-Student-Transportation-Departments.pdf

Current Law – The Growth Management Act and Local Growth Plans

The Growth Management Act (GMA) is a state law that requires local governments to manage growth and minimize sprawl, including encouraging the limitation of development to designated urban growth areas and protecting land for conservation, farmland, and recreation. The law originally passed in 1990 and serves to concentrate development to areas where there is existing water and electricity infrastructure, transportation services, businesses, schools, and government services. The GMA encourages development to occur in areas where infrastructure and services already exists and to be in a compact and accessible manner in order to reduce cost burden. However, under the GMA decisions around growth and development are made through comprehensive plans developed at the local level. It is at this local level that school siting decisions are made with input from schools, government agencies, and community stakeholders. Some local plans include rules that limit school siting to occur within the urban growth area, but most comprehensive plans include development regulations that limit the locations of schools. School districts are not required to plan under the GMA, but should work with local jurisdictions on how to best site schools according to their development regulations. This means connecting to services that local jurisdictions provide, as well as understanding their impact on transportation and other infrastructure decisions.

School Siting

There have been several schools and districts throughout the state who have argued that current law is hindering their ability to build schools to serve a growing student population. With certain requirements in place for required space allotment per student and the increasing cost of land in some urban growth areas, these schools say there either is not a site large enough to meet the needs and requirements of the school or that the cost is too high to purchase land for a school. Some of these schools have argued that working with their local jurisdiction is too lengthy and burdensome of a process and therefore have advocated for a modification of the GMA that, for example, allows for schools to be considered "essential public facilities" that can be developed outside of the urban growth area.

Health and prevention advocates have argued against making such amendments to the GMA and instead encouraging schools to work with their local jurisdiction to find solutions. By allowing schools to be located outside of the urban growth area, we further perpetuate the issue of schools being located too far away from the families they serve. In turn, there will likely be a decrease in the number of kids who walk and bike to school. Schools built outside of the urban growth area also often do not have the infrastructure to accommodate walking and biking, such as sidewalks and bike lanes. The building of such infrastructure outside of the urban growth area is in fact discouraged since it is both costly to develop and also puts increased pressure on growth. Schools built outside of the urban growth area are also not centrally located within a community which results in less opportunity for joint use and weekend and after school activities.

Division Over Fiscal Impact

One of the main arguments made by those advocating for school siting outside of the urban growth area relates to the affordability of purchasing land and development. Such up-front

expenses are often cheaper outside of urban areas, which could make the initial building of a new school less costly. Advocates who support building inside the urban growth area believe that while there may be some up-front savings, the ongoing cost of transporting students greater distances and extending other services and infrastructure will outweigh any initial cost savings in the long run. The apparent savings in up-front cost does not begin to factor in the cost of negative health outcomes that result from a decrease in physical activity amongst children and an increase in childhood obesity.

EXISTING EFFORTS

There have been several attempts to loosen school siting rules through modification of the GMA in recent sessions. Bethel School District and a few others have raised concerns around their inability to build schools outside the urban growth area and worked with others to introduce legislation around this issue.

Attempts to Weaken Current School Siting Laws

Senate Bill 6426 (2016) would have allowed schools to be considered essential public facilities under certain circumstances, which in turn would allow some schools to be built outside of the urban growth areas. While proponents of the exemption view this as a way to build schools to serve a growing student population, opponents believe this undermines the GMA by allowing some schools to skip out on the city and county planning processes. Opponents also cite concerns with the decrease in active routes to school and the increase in the cost of student transportation that would result. The legislation passed out of the Senate in 2016, but did not pass out of committee in the House.

Similar legislation has been considered in previous years and it is anticipated will be introduced in the 2017 legislative session.

Task Force on School Siting

During the 2015 session there was a lot of discussion around school siting with no solution being found among stakeholders and legislators. As a result, a Legislative Task Force on School Siting was established. The Task Force was directed to review the challenges that schools face given increases in student population, the costs associated with building schools, and recent education reforms such as smaller class sizes and full-day kindergarten. They also discussed other issues relating to school siting such as the cost of transporting students to rural versus urban areas, impacts on regional growth plans, health impacts, and the availability of public infrastructure such as water, sewer, and law enforcement. Due to the unusual length of the 2015 session, the Task Force was only able to meet three times and were not able to reach agreement on recommendations. Instead, the Task Force put forth in their final report a list of the potential recommendations that were considered by the Task Force. The report included the estimated vote count for each strategy, but did not reach agreement on any specific approach. *See Appendix A for the list of recommendations considered by the task force.*

POTENTIAL PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The primary prevention strategy relating to school siting is to defend against attempts to weaken the local growth management process through modification of the Growth Management Act to allow school siting outside of the urban growth area. Encouraging schools to be built within urban growth areas helps keep schools closer to the children and families they serve, therefore making them more accessible via walking and biking. The health benefits of having active routes to school needs to continue to be part of policy discussions.

RESOURCES

Report of the Legislative Task Force on School Siting (2015)
Summary Report: First Summit on School Planning and Siting in Washington (2007) – OSPI
School Siting: Location Affects the Potential to Walk or Bike – Safe Routes National Partnership, State Policies Best Practices
Washington State Student Travel Survey Report (2015) – WA Department of Transportation Local Programs Division and WA State Department of Health Office of Healthy Communities

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Appendix A: Recommendations Considered by the School Siting Task Force
These are not listed in any order of priority and the task force vote is included.
Language taken directly from report:
http://leg.wa.gov/JointCommittees/Archive/TFSS/Documents/TFSS_FinalRpt.pdf

1. Classify schools as "essential public facilities" under the Growth Management Act. Estimated vote count was 7 "yes" to 6 "no."
2. Classify schools as "essential public facilities" under the Growth Management Act where existing densities are met or located. Estimated vote count was 5 "yes" to 5 "no."
3. Classify public schools as an "essential public facility." a. Allow urban services in the Rural Area through utility extensions that are solely dedicated for school purposes. b. Implementation of this change at the local level would be done by distinguishing (using differing criteria): i. "essential public facilities" in the Urban Area; and ii. "essential public facilities" in the Rural Area. Estimated vote count was 7 "yes" to 6 "no."
4. Amend HB 1420 (2015), which would permit schools outside of the urban growth boundary when specified criteria are met, to apply statewide and adopt it. Estimated vote count was 8 "yes" to 5 "no."
5. Amend HB 1420, relating to school siting in the Rural Area, in order to: a. apply it statewide; and b. allow urban services to serve schools in the Rural Area, as necessary, through utility extensions that are solely dedicated for school purposes when criteria to site schools has been satisfied. Estimated vote count was 7 "yes" to 6 "no."
6. Authorize schools located outside of an urban growth area to connect to services, such as sewer and water, within the urban growth area under certain conditions. Estimated vote count was 6 "yes" to 4 "no."
7. Where a proposed new school site is located outside an existing urban growth area, urban infrastructure is within one-half mile of the site, and surrounding existing density is greater than current rural density standards, during the next comprehensive plan update, extension of the urban growth area to include the new school site with appropriate zoning surrounding the site that enables children to walk and bicycle to school should be considered. Estimated vote count was 7 "yes" to 4 "no."
8. In areas where existing density is greater than current rural density standards, a school may be sited without urban infrastructure. Estimated vote count was 7 "yes" to 3 "no."
9. Provide a safe harbor from litigation for counties, cities, and school districts that site schools outside of an urban growth area, and/or require courts and the Growth Management Hearings Board to defer to local school siting decisions that meet certain criteria. Estimated vote count was 9 "yes" to 5 "no."
10. Direct school districts and local jurisdictions to plan together. Require counties and cities to work collaboratively with school districts to plan for school siting needs, including conducting a holistic review of school feeder patterns, projected growth, services, and other criteria, during the development and amendment of comprehensive plan and development regulations. Estimated vote count was 4 "yes" to 1 "no."
11. Consider long-term transportation costs, including student transportation and traffic congestion. Estimated vote count was 6 "yes" to 5 "no."