

# Model School Siting Policies *For School Districts*

Quang “Q” Dang,  
Senior Staff Attorney  
Public Health Law & Policy



# Public Health Law & Policy

**We partner with state and local leaders  
to improve health in communities.**

**We research legal and policy questions, draft policy  
language, and train community leaders to put these  
ideas to work.**



# Why does public health care about school siting?

Good school siting supports **physically active kids**:

- Safe routes to school
- Joint use
- Equity

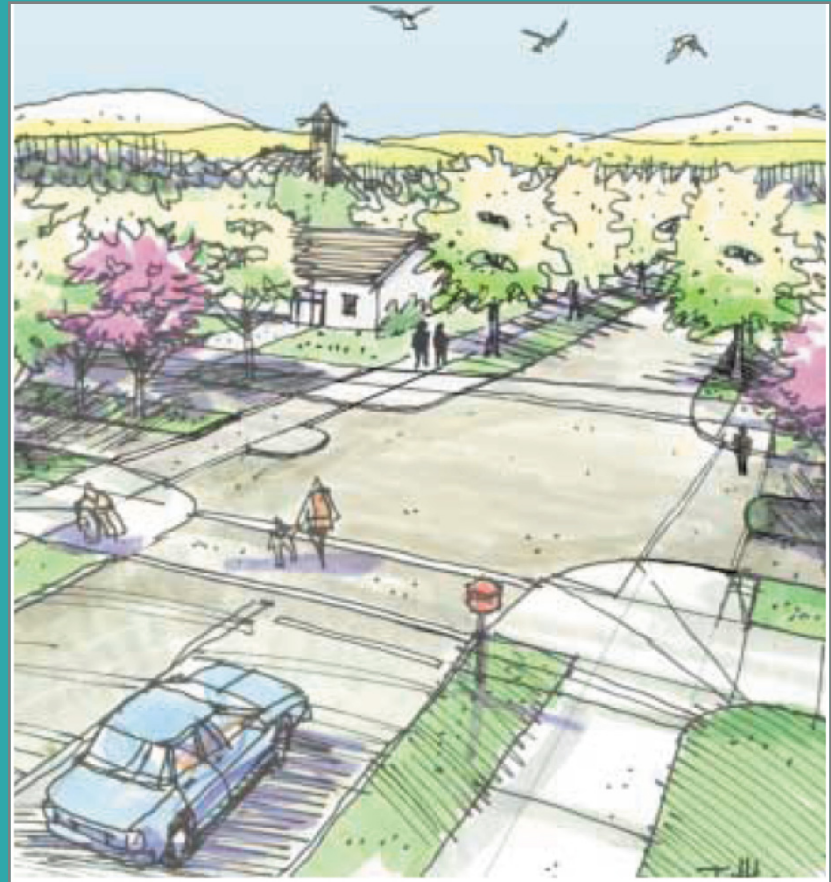
Also:

- Asthma
- Toxics
- Injury



# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan transportation departments)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government



# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan planning organizations)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government



# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan planning organizations)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government



Photo by wallyg

# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan planning organizations)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government



# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan planning organizations)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government





# Who Are the Players?

- **School** districts
- **Local** governments (planning, parks, public works)
- **Regional** governments (counties, metropolitan planning organizations)
- **State** laws (and state departments of education, transportation, health)
- **Federal** government



# PHLP Model School District Siting Policies

## **Board Policy [E]: School Siting Policy**

It is the policy of [insert name of school board or district] (District) that school siting determinations will support the overall needs of students, their families, and the broader community. "School siting determinations" include decisions about new school locations; maintaining, renovating, or expanding existing schools; and closing or consolidating existing schools.

District acknowledges the importance of schools' locations for the entire community; their ability to serve as centers of the community, landmarks or historic sites, anchors for neighborhoods, and emergency centers. Locating schools near residential neighborhoods and in central locations has important benefits for students' health, allowing students to use school grounds for play and physical activity when school is not in session, enabling students to walk or bicycle to school, and making it possible for families to be more easily involved in school activities.

In making school siting determinations, District will strive towards:

1. **Collaborative Planning:** Work toward meaningful coordinated planning with local government/s], with the goal of sharing data, addressing joint needs regarding school locations, ensuring due consideration of environment impact and other siting factors, and encouraging residential and mixed-income residential development near school sites.
  2. **Long-Term Data-Driven Planning:** Engage in long-term planning, based on data regarding current and projected future student enrollment, demographics, residential density of children in new and existing development, demographics, development, student transportation costs and trends, quantification of costs and benefits and full-cost accounting, and so on.
- Public Input:** Provide a substantial role for public input into short- and long-term facilities planning in order to ensure community buy-in and achieve better co-location of facilities (e.g. libraries, gymnasiums, etc.) for use both by students and by the larger community, and use agreements spelling out how use and

# Using the Model Policies

## Districts can:

- adopt initial policy
- adopt all the policies
- modify to meet local needs and state law



# The goals

## **Board Policy [F1]: School Siting Policy**

It is the policy of [*insert name of school board or district*] (District) that school siting determinations will support the overall needs of students, their families, and the broader community. “School siting determinations” include decisions about new school locations; maintaining, renovating, or expanding existing schools; and closing or consolidating existing schools.

District acknowledges the importance of schools’ locations for the entire community: their ability to serve as centers of the community, landmarks or historic sites, anchors for neighborhoods, and emergency centers. Locating schools near residential neighborhoods and in central locations has important benefits for students’ health, allowing students to use school grounds for play and physical activity when school is not in session, enabling students to walk or bicycle to school, and making it possible for families to be more easily involved in school activities.

In making school siting determinations, District will strive towards:

1. **Collaborative Planning:** Work toward meaningful coordinated planning with [local government/s], with the goal of sharing data, addressing joint needs regarding school locations, ensuring due consideration of environment impact and other siting factors, and encouraging residential and mixed-income residential development near school sites.
2. **Long-Term Data-Driven Planning:** Engage in long-term planning, based on data regarding current and projected future student enrollment, demographics, residential density of children in new and existing development, anticipated development, student transportation costs and trends, quantification of costs and benefits and full-cost accounting, and so on.
3. **Public Input:** Provide a substantial role for public input into short- and long-term school facilities planning in order to ensure community buy-in and achieve better results.
4. **Co-Location:** Consider co-location of facilities (e.g. libraries, gymnasiums, parks, exercise fields, etc.) for use both by students and by the larger community, either by locating facilities near to each other, or through more formal intergovernmental contracts or joint use agreements spelling out how use and



# School districts can adopt policies that follow the 10 key elements of smart school siting



NATIONAL POLICY & LEGAL ANALYSIS NETWORK  
TO PREVENT CHILDHOOD OBESITY



## Ten Fundamental Elements of Smart School Siting

*For School Districts and Local Government*

1. **Collaborative Planning:** Provide for meaningful coordinated planning between school districts and local governments, with the goal of sharing data, addressing joint needs regarding school locations, ensuring due consideration of environment impact and other siting factors, and encouraging residential and mixed-income residential development near school sites.
2. **Long-Term Data-Driven Planning:** Engage in long-term planning, based on data regarding current and projected future student enrollment, demographics, residential density of children in new and existing development, anticipated development, student transportation costs and trends, quantification of costs and benefits and full-cost accounting, and so on.
3. **Public Input:** Provide a substantial role for public input into short- and long-term school facilities planning in order to ensure community buy-in and achieve better results.
4. **Co-Location:** Consider co-location of facilities (e.g. libraries, gymnasiums, parks, exercise fields, etc.) for use both by students and by the larger community, either by locating facilities near to each other, or through more formal intergovernmental contracts or joint use agreements spelling out how use and responsibility will be shared.
5. **Preference for Renovation:** Consider renovating existing facilities before building new, especially where historic facilities are in question.
6. **Diverse, Walkable Schools through School Siting and Assignment Policies:** Work toward schools that allow students, families, and staff to walk, bicycle, and take public transportation, provide the community with easy access to school facilities, and serve a student body that represents the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the community's students and families through:
  - Providing schools in locations that balance walkability and diversity; and
  - Designing school attendance zones and school assignment policies to support walkability and diversity.
7. **Equity in School Facilities:** In weighing determinations about school construction, closures, and rehabilitation, consider equity of school facilities to avoid providing some students with an inferior learning environment to that provided to others.
8. **Health Impacts:** Consider all health impacts of proposed sites (either through a health impact assessment (HIA) or another methodical analysis of health impacts), including the location's supportiveness and safety for physical activity; past or present toxic contamination of site or nearby areas; nearby sources of pollution or toxic contaminants, such as highways, industrial facilities, or pesticide applications; air pollution levels and asthma; etc.
9. **Safe Routes to School:** Support Safe Routes to School encouragement and education programs in schools in order to maximize opportunities presented by school location for active transportation.
10. **Safe Infrastructure for Walking, Bicycling, and Public Transportation in School Vicinity:** Improve safety and convenience of travel in school vicinity and on school property via walking, bicycling, and public transportation by providing safe infrastructure.



# Long-Term Coordinated Planning

## **Board Policy [F2]: Long-Term Coordinated Planning**

**COMMENT:** In the past, it has not been common practice for districts to engage in long-term coordinated planning with the public and local government regarding school facilities. This has led to many negative outcomes – schools with excess or insufficient capacity, schools located far from any residences, school sites where the local town has refused to build sewer and roads, unanticipated transportation costs, and so on.<sup>2</sup> We encourage schools to include this module on long-term coordinated planning, while modifying it to address local requirements, needs, and procedures.

District shall engage in long-term facilities planning by creating and [regularly/annually/ every five years] updating a [School Facilities Plan], setting out an overall [5/10/20] year plan for school facilities. The School Facilities Plan shall include an assessment of enrollment capacity, an analysis of community growth and change factors, and an inventory of facilities and assessment of their condition, utilization, and adequacy.

[District shall also establish a capital improvement program and a facilities maintenance plan.] The School Facilities Plan shall draw on the considerations and factors set forth in this policy, as well as those set out in Board Policy [F4]: School Siting Determinations, to

# Procedures for Siting Decisions

## **Board Policy [F3]: School Siting Procedures**

District shall establish a [process/procedure] to follow for school siting determinations, to include the following components:

1. The Board shall establish a school siting committee (Committee) that is responsible for making recommendations to District regarding a given school siting determination. Committee shall include representatives of District, local elected officials and staff of [appropriate jurisdictions] [from the departments or agencies including planning, public works, parks, transportation, housing, community services, and \_\_\_\_\_], parents, and school staff. Other members may include: community members; public health, housing, and community development organizations; groups focused on active transportation, smart growth, and education; environmental advocacy and environmental and social justice groups; local trade/building associations, and other community stakeholders.
2. Committee shall review the School Facilities Plan and assess how the plan accords with the current issues and the decision in question.
3. Committee shall obtain and analyze all relevant data and geospatial mapping regarding projected enrollment, student residential density and demographics, and educational needs, and should consider them in relation to potential sites and options. Committee should assess the effect of different sites or options on walkability, bikability, and diversity, as well as other factors.
4. Committee shall assess all potential sites and options via the criteria laid out in Board Policy [F4]: School Siting Determinations. Assessment of potential sites should include an environmental review, a walk around the site and neighborhood to evaluate safety of travel routes and other factors, and a methodical assessment of the benefits and drawbacks of each site and option.
5. Committee or District personnel shall conduct a health impact assessment or otherwise assess community and health impacts when making siting determinations, particularly when considering the closure of a school. The

# Criteria for Siting Decisions



## Board Policy [F4]: School Siting Determinations

District recognizes that it is necessary to balance numerous complex issues in making determinations regarding the location of school educational facilities, including factors such as: the suitability of possible sites for educational needs in question; costs (for land, rehabilitation, reimbursement rates, construction, transportation, and more); ease of obtaining land; proximity of sites to students' residences; ability to coordinate with local jurisdictions to share facilities and resources; safety of sites for student health in terms of potential exposure of students to environmental contaminants; safety from natural hazards [such as flooding, earthquakes, etc]; site conditions and topography [; as well as \_\_\_\_].

In making school siting determinations (which, as noted above, include selecting new sites, renovating or rebuilding on existing sites, and closing existing schools), District shall give high priority to locations that:

- Are walkable and bikable: A walkable and bikable site is one for which [50]% of the assigned student population lives within a [1/2] mile travel distance of the school. In evaluating travel distance, consider natural or artificial barriers to convenient access, such as highways, streams, railroad tracks, or the like, that may make actual distance traveled further than direct distance.

**COMMENT:** In determining realistic distances and goals for walkability, each district will have to assess its own current and future levels of density and development patterns. Actual school travel patterns for elementary school children show that the great majority will walk ¼ mile to school, most will walk ½ mile to school, and few will walk further than 1 mile.<sup>10</sup> A 2 mile radius is generally considered realistic for biking by older elementary school children.

**COMMENT:** Clearly, many rural communities will have a particular challenge in complying with this recommendation. Different patterns of rural development – levels of density, whether towns have centers or not – will affect the determination of what a realistic yet beneficial goal may be.

**COMMENT:** Where a site is intended primarily for children beyond elementary school, or in dense urban areas, districts may also wish to include a provision stating: "In calculating the number of students whose residences are deemed to count towards the required travel distance, District may include students who live within a quarter mile of a transit stop that provides transit service directly to the assigned school."



# Site Design

- Bike parking
- Safe access by bike, on foot, bus, and car



## Board Policy [F5]: Site Design

In constructing a school or in renovating an existing school, District shall design and construct the site to accommodate the safety and convenience of students, including students with disabilities, in arriving and departing by different modes of transportation, including walking, bicycling, public transportation, school bus, and private vehicles. Site design shall minimize conflicts between pedestrians, bicycles, school buses, and private vehicles, and shall provide safe crossings.

District will ensure that new and renovated sites have ample bicycle parking, and will seek to provide and upgrade bicycle parking at existing schools. To the extent possible, bicycle parking shall be: (a) centrally located, for convenient access by students and to provide visual protection from attack, theft, or vandalism, and (b) protected from the elements. District will ensure that there is a practical route for bicycles through the school campus.

District shall support Safe Routes to School programs and events encouraging students to walk and bicycle to school.

District will design entrances and exits at the site to facilitate convenient access for pedestrians and bicyclists, while protecting safety of students during the school day. District will [seek to] avoid having entrances and exits on arterials, particularly for elementary schools. District will seek to integrate schools into the community by providing a number of access points to school grounds from the surrounding neighborhood and by encouraging use of trails, bike paths, and sidewalks to connect neighborhoods to the school.

For areas outside of District's jurisdiction, District will work with [the appropriate local

# Focus on Diversity and Walkability

- Siting criteria
- Policies regarding attendance zones and assignment



## Board Policy [F6]: Attendance Zones & Assignment Policies

**COMMENT:** Districts often divide students living within a school district into attendance zones. The zones can be redrawn (known as “redistricting”) with varying goals in mind, such as decreasing transportation times for students or promoting integration. Because attendance zones and student assignment policies have a significant effect on the ability of students to walk or bicycle to school, as well as the diversity of the school, districts should consider using these tools to promote both of these goals.

In engaging in school siting determinations, District shall evaluate existing attendance zones and assignment policies with the goal of creating schools that are walkable and bikable and also reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of District’s community.

District shall [consider implementing the following recommendations]:

**COMMENT:** Because changes to school attendance zones and assignment policies elicit strong community reactions and significantly affect districts’ procedures and operations, a district may be concerned about issues of diversity and walkability, yet not be ready to implement the suggested changes. In such cases, districts should include the bracketed language or begin exploring these issues in a preliminary way.

- As far as possible without compromising the racial, ethnic, and economic representativeness of schools, assign students to schools by neighborhood attendance zones.
- Draw attendance zones to maximize diversity and walkability within each zone, by reference to neighborhood demographics.
- Consider limiting school choice or magnet programs. Design these programs to support and enhance diversity, and to minimize negative effects on walkability. Consider establishing neighborhood preferences for these and charter school programs.

# The Vision: Vibrant, Diverse Community Centered Schools

- Located close to families and residents
- Integrated into the heart of community activities
- Representing and educating whole community





public health law & policy

# Quang “Q” Dang, JD

*Senior Staff Attorney*



[www.nplan.org](http://www.nplan.org) • [qdang@phlpnet.org](mailto:qdang@phlpnet.org) • (510) 302-3303

2201 Broadway, Suite 502, Oakland, CA 94612