

**Excerpts From:**

**HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS  
IN THE  
AGE OF SPRAWL:**

**WHY JOHNNY CAN'T WALK TO SCHOOL**

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## PREFACE

In June 2000, the National Trust for Historic Preservation added historic neighborhood schools to its annual list of America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places. In so doing, the National Trust sought to alert the public to various threats to these irreplaceable community landmarks:

- ◆ lack of money for needed repairs;
- ◆ an assumption that old is automatically bad and new is automatically good;
- ◆ public policies that discourage the maintenance of existing schools; and
- ◆ “mega-school sprawl” – the construction of giant educational facilities in remote, middle-of-nowhere locations that rule out the possibility of anyone's walking to school.

In putting historic neighborhood schools on its “endangered list,” the National Trust was responding to requests for help from grassroots groups from Maine to Montana fighting to save schools that have long served as neighborhood anchors and that could continue to provide a good education for young people.

It would be absurd to argue that every historic neighborhood school can or even should be saved. But it is equally absurd to argue that a school's age *automatically* means it cannot be preserved and adapted to meet modern educational program needs. One finds eloquent rebuttals to this all-too-common argument in such places as Spokane, Wash.; Hibbing, Minn.; Boise, Idaho; Manitowoc, Wis.; and Miami, Fla., where school boards have worked collaboratively with the community and outfitted historic schools with the very latest in computer technology, life-safety techniques, handicapped accessibility, and educational program features.

Schools were once thought of as important civic landmarks built to last a century. They represented community investments that inspired civic pride and participation in public life. Many of today's newer schools resemble big-box warehouses. Their architecture reflects little pride and they sometimes have an expected life span of a mere 30 years. With unprecedented amounts of public money about to flow into school construction programs as a result of pending legislation and recent court orders in such states as Ohio and New Jersey, it's time to reexamine public policies that affect the neighborhoods in which schools function and the ability of communities to save still serviceable, landmark schools – *as schools*. This report does exactly that. It is part of a larger initiative, which includes the National Trust's publication of *A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools* (June 2000, [www.nthpbooks.org](http://www.nthpbooks.org)); a school appraisal guide to help school officials evaluate the merits of renovating older schools; a future web site on historic school preservation; and a compilation of case studies on successful school renovations. Robert Nieweg, director of the National Trust's Southern Field Office, is leading this overall effort.

The National Trust and its quarter-million members have five decades of experience in preserving and revitalizing older neighborhoods, and neighborhoods are akin to the proverbial village it takes to raise a child. To the extent that the quality of the community affects the mindset that students bring to school, to the extent that a strong and cohesive neighborhood can provide a safety net and positive outlets for young people, and to the extent that schools serve as community anchors, the interests of historic preservationists, parents, children, and educators converge.

Richard Moe  
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### **AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE: POLICY REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS**

If it's time to bring back smaller, community-centered schools, as many educators believe, it's also time to stop destroying such schools where they already exist. Many historic neighborhood schools embody the very benefits seen in smaller, community centered schools. It's also time to give kids the option of walking to school and to free families from the burden of financing a third or fourth car in order to give young people the independence they should have. It's time to preserve – and upgrade, when necessary – historic schools whose architecture inspires civic pride. When such schools cannot be preserved, communities should have the choice of replacing them on the same site with well-designed new schools that can continue to provide the “glue” that older neighborhoods need. The National Trust for Historic Preservation to move these goals forward offers the recommendations below.

#### **Top Twelve Policy Recommendations**

1. Put historic neighborhood schools on a level playing field with new schools. Eliminate funding biases that favor new construction over school renovation and good stewardship.
2. Eliminate arbitrary acreage standards that undermine the ability of established communities to retain and upgrade (or replace on the same site, when necessary) historic and older schools that could continue to serve as centers of community.
3. Avoid “mega-school sprawl” – massive schools in remote locations that stimulate sprawl development and are accessible only by car or bus.
4. Develop procedures for accepting land donated by developers for new schools. Land in “sprawl locations” that are inappropriate for schools should be rejected.
5. Encourage school districts to cooperate with other institutions – e.g., government agencies, nonprofits, churches, and private businesses -- to share playgrounds, ball fields, and parking as well as to provide transit services, when appropriate.
6. Establish guidelines, training programs, and funding mechanisms to ensure

adequate school building maintenance. Create disincentives for school districts to defer needed maintenance and allow buildings to fall into disrepair.

7. Require feasibility studies comparing the costs of new schools with those of renovating existing schools before new schools are built and existing ones abandoned. Hire only architects with experience in rehabilitation work to conduct such studies. These studies should also consider the impact of a school's closing on existing neighborhoods, long-term transportation costs, and municipal service burdens. Finally, these studies must be presented to the public for comment before projects move forward. If they are presented only to the superintendent and school facilities committee, their use is limited.
8. Reexamine exemptions given to local school districts from local planning, zoning, and growth management laws.
9. Work to ensure that a minimum of 50% of the students can walk or bike to school in cities, towns, and suburbs. Promote safe-routes-to-school legislation in the states.
10. When a historic school cannot be preserved and reused, school districts and/or local governments should implement plans for the building's adaptive use or replacement so that it does not become a source of blight in the neighborhood.
11. Promote "smart codes" legislation to encourage the rehabilitation and modernization of historic schools as well as other still serviceable buildings.
12. Provide education and training in school renovation techniques and options for school facility planners, contractors, private consultants, architects, school board members, municipal officials and others.