

Smart Schools Initiative

Mission

The Smart Schools Initiative of Smart Growth America aims to develop common ground between the national movements for smart growth and for quality public education. Since 2004, this cross-cutting program has been building a coalition that can break through the longtime intractable problems that have held back both schools and the communities in which they serve. Our long-term goal? *Healthier, more prosperous and inclusive communities, where all children have the opportunity, in their neighborhoods and their schools, to flourish.*

Common Challenges

Too often, advocates for smart growth, community development, and quality schools end up working at cross-purposes within their own narrow domains. But the issues they tackle are inextricably linked. Progress in one field often requires progress in another. For example:

- School quality is one of the principal drivers that impels families to move further out of cities, which means that those fighting urban sprawl cannot overlook the need to create quality schools in our older, lower-income communities.
- Community design and growth patterns directly influence student health and the local tax-base, which means that those fighting for good schools cannot overlook the need to promote more equitable growth and land-use practices.

Common Policy Goals

The Smart Schools Initiative has identified a number of policies around which it plans to focus grassroots attention, mobilize opinion leaders, and spur reform efforts by public education and smart-growth advocates:

- School Buildings. Rehabilitate older (and often smaller) schools rather than bulldoze them in favor of new sprawling mega-schools, and repeal “minimum acreage” requirements for public schools.
- Balanced Neighborhoods. Prioritize affordable housing and mixed-income neighborhoods as essential building blocks for strong, stable communities.
- Community Schools. Expand the dimensions of school activities that involve more of the community, and improve the health of schoolchildren by expanding opportunities to walk or bike to school and by increasing access to locally-grown food at schools.

- Civic Engagement. Promote citizen participation on the issue of schools and land use, and require integrated planning among school boards, governmental agencies, etc.
- Economic Development. Make strong schools instead of corporate giveaways a centerpiece of economic development
- School Funding. Deemphasize local property-tax financing of schools that both harms schools and spurs sprawl; promote decent schools for all children.

What We Do

While schools and community change are both strong local issues, the Smart Schools Initiative serves as a national convener of diverse groups, a spur for local coalition-building, and a central information clearinghouse. We not only want to educate but also want to lay the foundation for systemic change. In carrying out this work, we have convened strategy sessions and public forums; developed a cutting-edge web site (www.smart-schools.org); and publish a widely circulated bi-monthly electronic newsletter to help keep activists abreast of progress in the field.

Next Phase of Work

Over the coming year, the Smart Schools Initiative plans to further strengthen its national coalition and step up its efforts to change the current outmoded approaches towards schools and communities. It will continue to build awareness, among key constituencies and members of the public, about necessary critical policy reforms. It will publish a major book that defines the field for a much larger audience, and prepare a handbook for communities seeking change in their neighborhoods. And it will hold regional forums and workshops to further define key policy changes and help galvanize local action, along with producing timely issue papers and case studies of success.

Leadership

The Smart Schools, Smart Growth Initiative was founded by two leaders in the field: Jonathan Weiss, a former Clinton administration official and author of the recent KnowledgeWorks Foundation report, *Public Schools and Economic Development: What the Research Shows*; and Michael Shuman, author of *The Small-Mart Revolution: How Local Businesses Are Beating the Global Competition*. Smart Growth America, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Public Education Network are founding partners. The Initiative is a project of Smart Growth America, a national coalition working towards better choices for communities, and draws on a network of over one hundred local regional and state grassroots organizations around the country.