

Creating Joint Use Agreements between Schools and Communities



Community-centered schools are defined as small schools located near the families they serve, accessible via walking or biking, and fully integrated into the life of a community¹. Over the past 30 years, Illinois has seen a decline in the number of community-centered schools, caused by a number of policy changes at the state and local level. This policy brief focuses on the role that Joint Use Agreements are playing in preserving and enhancing community-centered schools, and is one in a series focused on the laws, policies and practices that have benefitted and hindered the construction and preservation of community-centered schools in Illinois.

Context and Importance of the Problem

A Joint Use Agreement is a formal agreement between two or more entities to share use of a space. Schools districts, government entities and community-based organizations can strengthen community connections, preserve resources, reduce their costs and increase opportunities for physical activity through Joint Use Agreements. Joint Use Agreements seek to form partnerships between community institutions and organizations to ensure that safe, centrally located and well-maintained facilities are available to all who wish to use them. Joint use partnerships can take on several forms:

- School districts and municipalities or non-profit organizations may enter into an agreement allowing schools to use municipal indoor and/or outdoor space during school hours.
- School districts and municipalities or non-profit organizations may enter into an agreement allowing the municipality or non-profit organization to use school indoor and/or outdoor space when school is not in session.
- Schools, municipalities and/or non-profit organizations may create an agreement to share available indoor or outdoor spaces and amenities.

Why Joint Use?

Many communities and schools recognize that joint use partnerships provide a number of positive benefits and therefore are already involved in sharing facilities and space without a formal agreement. Some benefits of joint use include:

- Increased offering of school and community services: Joint use partnerships allow communities to capitalize on existing infrastructure and offer year-round programs that serve all age groups.

¹ National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Checklist: Is your school a community centered school?." <http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/historic-schools/helping-johnny-walk-to-school/checklist.html>. Accessed on March 1, 2011.

- Improved community health: Joint use of school athletic facilities creates additional opportunities for community physical activity, and school use of community athletic facilities allow for additional opportunities for physical education classes.
- Stronger relationships between schools and the communities they serve: Joint use partnerships help schools and communities better communicate their needs and identify opportunities for shared development.
- Decreased costs for all parties involved in the agreement: Joint Use Agreements can help schools and communities share the burden of short- and long-term maintenance costs.
- Potential to preserve community-centered schools: Schools that lack all of the facilities necessary to meet student needs may decide to take on expensive construction and rehabilitation projects. Some schools must move from a small, community-centered site to a large site on the fringe of a community in order to provide the space needed to meet all of the modern needs of a school. A joint use partnership with a municipal or non-profit organization may help school districts capitalize on existing facilities, thereby saving money and possibly preserving a community-centered school site.
- Long-term formalized partnerships: Many communities and schools are currently informally engaged in shared use of facilities. By creating a written Joint Use Agreement, communities can help strengthen existing partnerships and ensure that co-use of facilities is sustained.

Despite the benefits, there are many arguments cited against allowing community use of schools. The result is a glut of school facilities that are used only when school is in session and sit empty on evenings, weekends and during summer vacation. Concerns over liability, vandalism, maintenance and injury deter many school administrators from allowing use of school facilities after hours. Other arguments are centered on budget issues, staffing needs and additional costs.

A formalized Joint Use Agreement can be crafted to address these concerns and can also help to ensure that the agreements remain in place in the event of staff or administrative change.

Best Practices for Implementing Joint Use in Your Community

Through a carefully constructed Joint Use Agreement, the pros outweigh the cons by far. A formal Joint Use Agreement between a school and a government organization or community agency can address all of the concerns and assign responsibility for shared use of space. A government agency or private organization that uses a school space can assume all liability, maintenance, supervision and other related costs associated with use during those hours. The National Policy and Legal Analysis Network created an extensive list of resources on liability and other considerations for communities wishing to create a Joint Use Agreement.² Furthermore, Illinois law states that the entity securing the Joint Use Agreement is in charge of securing the liability insurance in connection with such use.³⁴

² See <http://www.nplanonline.org/childhood-obesity/products/nplan-joint-use-agreements>

³ See Illinois Compiled Statutes 70 ILCS 1205 Park District Code. Section 8-18

⁴ See http://www.nplanonline.org/sites/phlpnet.org/files/IL_JointUse_Final_SP_20090311.pdf

Because there are many types of joint use relationships, the steps necessary to implement a joint use agreement vary. However, the same basic steps can be taken. Schools interested in adopting joint use agreements can take the following steps:

- Needs Assessment: Every Joint Use Agreement is unique, requiring a specific plan, structure and implementation based on the needs and values of the school, community and partner organizations. To initiate the process, a school district in need of additional space can begin by evaluating the facilities available to the community, program costs, insurance, maintenance and operations necessary to execute an agreement. A school district interested in opening its doors to the community can begin by identifying partners, cataloging facilities that could be open to community use, and identifying additional building operating and maintenance costs.
- Establish and build relationships: The school district should evaluate potential partners within the community, such as local park districts, non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations or other educational organizations that are committed to sharing resources. The school may work with existing partners or choose to build a relationship with a new partner organization. Regardless, it is important to build a collaborative relationship with any joint use partner.
- Adopt a policy: The school board can adopt a new policy or revise an existing policy that supports and encourages joint use agreements. The policy should be aligned with the district's vision, goals and other related policies, such as Wellness Policies.
- Develop a Joint Use Agreement: A joint use agreement is the formal agreement that sets terms, conditions and responsibilities for each party sharing a defined space or facility. Each party is responsible for developing, maintaining and operating the shared space. There is no one right way to develop an agreement. The agreement can be as simple as providing staff to open school grounds to the public during non-school hours. The agreement can be more complex, outlining hours and allowable uses in a particular space. Principals, maintenance staff and teachers should all be briefed on the policy prior to adoption.

Joint use agreements are an ideal way to optimize community resources and expand opportunities for healthy, physically active schools and communities. By creating a formal Joint Use Agreement, school districts can share responsibilities, costs, maintenance and liability with partner agencies and organizations.

Examples of Joint Use in Illinois

Throughout the state, schools are forming partnerships with municipalities, non-profit organizations and other community-based organizations to share resources and breathe new life into aging buildings.

Prairie du Rocher, IL

Prairie du Rocher Elementary School is located in Prairie du Rocher, IL, one of Illinois' oldest communities. Originally settled by the French in the early 1600s, the community was once one of the largest in Illinois. As time passed, however, the population slowly declined due to a series of devastating floods. Prairie du Rocher is located on the Mississippi River flood plain.

Prairie du Rocher Elementary School's history is nearly as old as that of the community. The school was officially created through legislation in 1917, but its existence and preservation date back to a plot of land gifted to the Village of Prairie du Rocher by the French government in 1719. Following the annexation of Illinois into the U.S., the school was transferred to the State of Illinois as a common school district. The school operated out of a series of homes until the mid-1900s when a school building was constructed. Prairie du Rocher Elementary School originally served students in grades K-12, but when community needs changed the high school students were sent to Chester High School.

In the 1960s, Prairie du Rocher's student population grew, which meant that the school had to either build a new school building, transfer some of the students to a school in a neighboring town or find a way to expand their existing building. None of these options was ideal. The district did not have enough funding to construct a school and did not want to send students to schools outside of the community.

After a long community process, Prairie du Rocher Elementary School's next-door neighbor, St. Joseph's Church, offered to rent the second floor of their annex out to the school to ensure that students could stay in the community. Since then, Prairie du Rocher Elementary School has enjoyed a successful Joint Use Agreement with St. Joseph's Church, using both the second floor of the church annex for school purposes as well as the church parking lot for staff parking and the church playground for PE class and recess. The partnership helped Prairie du Rocher preserve its community-centered school and negated the need to send children outside of the community to attend school each day.

Des Plaines, IL

Apollo Elementary School is a large school located in unincorporated Des Plaines. Over 600 K-5 students attend the school each day. Besides ample classroom space, the school has many assets, including a large indoor gym and a theatre.

Apollo Elementary School has embraced the role of an 18-hour school. Each day during the school year, Apollo Elementary School remains open after the regular school day for an after-school program that uses both its gym, outdoor spaces and has a mobile office located on Apollo Elementary School's grounds. In the evening, Apollo Elementary School classrooms stay open for an adult ESL class. On weekends, a community church uses Apollo's theater to hold services.

Each of the activities that take place on the grounds of Apollo Elementary School happens because of a Joint Use Agreement.

West Chicago, IL

West Chicago is a dense suburb of Chicago with limited opportunities for new development. Because of this, community agencies have entered into a number of Joint Use Agreements. For example, the park district uses West Chicago School District 33's field space when school is not in session and shares maintenance costs and care in return. In addition, the school district entered into an agreement with the local forest preserve to swap land. The district was able to build Currier Elementary School on forest preserve land that was located closer to the neighborhood center in exchange for school district land on the outskirts of the city. The two agencies entered into a lease agreement for the swapped land for 100 years. Finally, West Chicago School District 33 and the high school district entered into an agreement to allow the high school to build a baseball field on one of the elementary school fields.

Clearly, the relationships formed in the West Chicago community through joint use have resulted in numerous benefits to the schools and communities.

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