EDUCATING THE CITY:
Urban schools as social infrastructure

Dr Jos Boys
Course Director, MSc Learning Environments,
Bartlett Real Estate Institute UCL

Anna Jeffery
Associate, Architecture Initiative

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INSTITUTE

A 5-point framework for unlocking the potential of schools in urban communities

1 Broadening How We Value Schools

Schools can have a very positive impact on our personal and collective well-being both directly and through the many local services and facilities they can offer: provide life-long learning opportunities; act as communicators of information and knowledge to the community at large; be a catalyst for urban regeneration; promote social cohesion and stability; and be uniquely responsive and relevant to their immediate publics. All these aspects of community value need to be included in policy, implementation and evaluation measures, and made a key consideration in planning application criteria.

2 Educational Planning and Facilities Are For The Long Term

In the current context, there is a lack of long-term vision about what school assets and buildings can offer beyond immediate policy and financing agendas. This short-termism results in an inability to take into account broader issues for schools and their communities or to connect sites of social infrastructure. Our schools continue to be delivered and designed through fragmented processes, where different actors don't have time, resources or motivation to build deeper connections nor formulate educational and investment objectives that include social value over time. Schools investment needs to be understood as long value capture, as part of the bigger picture, for not just the immediate cohort but for all ages in a locality, for this generation and the next.

3 Join Up The Thinking

Many working in the education sector struggle with the seeming imbalance and disconnect between different government departments in their various policies and practices around procurement, design quality, standards and requirements. Schools guidelines at national and local levels are also fragmented and inconsistent. This is because current educational building procurement is predominantly framed as an operational and technical problem, an approach that ends up preventing richer stakeholder and public debate on school buildings, their multiple functions, the need for urban and local integration, and for the environmental and social sustainability of schools. In this context, it is vital to explore new strategies for enabling holistic approaches and to create evidence -led research and development that can underpin debate decision-making. This is to support both the initial procurement and design process and when schools are adapted.

4 Enable Schools To Deliver Community Support

Although all schools already work with their local communities, they often struggle to develop community connections beyond those 'given' through pupil cohorts, parents and carers. Operational and regulatory constraints can further hinder the management and community use of school facilities. School leaders usually have to organise ways to enhance community provision on a case-by-case basis, with little guidance about best practice to inform their actions.

Policies around, for example, safeguarding, maintenance costs, and revenue management are important. But we also need a sharing of knowledge about resource-effective and regulation-compliant ways to enable and increase community involvement.

5 Design In Community Potential From The Beginning

When schools are built to minimum space standards, multiple uses are already made more difficult. Without flexibility and long-term adaptability designed in, users have to work harder and more creatively to develop and sustain community connections. Further, the conventional gated school with limited usage during evenings, weekends and holidays reduces potential, whilst remaining a very poor use of expensive resources.

We already have past and contemporary examples of schools designed for community integration to learn from. In addition, new types of schools, particularly in dense urban sites with high land and property prices, offer important opportunities for sharing facilities and making efficient use of resources. We should enable and evaluate these so as to share and build on innovative practices for better educating the city.

4b. Provide guidance for community management and operations

Both the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) and the Public Policy Unit for Wales have produced guides to increasing the community use of school facilities.[42] There are also examples of good practice internationally.[43]

The DENI guide, for example, provides a toolkit for school managers to help them make their facilities available and to form community partnerships. They summarise essential features as follows:

☐ Strong co-operative relationship between partners;

☐ Local leaderships and a desire the make things happen;

☐ Clarity amongst partners on how the facility will be managed;

☐ A sound understanding of practical issues such as insurance and finance in sharing facilities;

☐ Putting in place arrangements that will deliver benefits to both the school and the wider community.

☐ The guide also provides very practical management and logistical advice for schools, around service and maintenance costs, income and funding streams, and legal and security issues.

37- From chapter reprinted online as 'the Community School' by infed.org: education, community-building and change. https://infed.org/mobi/the-community-school/

38- Richard Leonard and Fiona Young, Hayball Architects, Australia

39- Marmot et al., 2020:94

40- Natarajan, Ilie & Cho, 2020

41- Tomaney and Pike, forthcoming

42- DENI (2014) Community Use of School Premises: A Guidance Toolkit for Schools, and Alan Dyson et al (2016) Increasing the use of school facilities Public Policy Institute for Wales

43- Government of South Australia Department for Education and Child Development (2017) Schools as Community Hubs: a practical guide for schools and pre-schools

We need to recognise poverty and inequalities in access to education, where schools are in a mess, or have experienced reputational harm, or are in areas of deprivation. When there is no money, there is no interest and it is the children who get to be the losers.

Adrian Packer, CEO, Core Education Trust

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Broadening How We Value Schools

The potential for schools to extend beyond a limited educational remit is becoming an increasingly urgent question, particularly within emerging and existing urban centres.

> ⌐ *It is about changing the way you think, actually schools are civic places. Let's think about all of the different elements of social infrastructure that create a hub of "civicness". If you can actually start thinking about schools, hospitals and every other place of social infrastructure in a community, and start to integrate that, that actually brings a whole different way of thinking about the management of assets.*
>
> Kathy Jones, School Infrastructure NSW Australia

The vast majority of schools are publicly funded assets, often with significant land and spatial requirements. It is vital that a much wider understanding of community value be included in policy, implementation and evaluation measures, and made a key consideration in planning application criteria. Whilst this can be called 'civic-ness', it is also about equality of opportunity and inclusion.

With this in mind, school comes to mean much more than just a building. As Deborah Ralls notes, "to unlock its community potential, [school] has to be a place in and through which social relations occur. Viewing a school in this way mirrors Massey's (1994) proposition that places should be conceptualised in terms of the social interactions, or processes, which they tie together."[5] This, then, is a relational approach, where the educational facilities, their surroundings and the diversity of inhabitants all affect what is possible.

Schools' wider social missions have been progressively limited by an increasing focus on standards, employability and individualized understandings of educational purpose. Not in themselves absolute negatives, but when these changes have taken place during austerity, with libraries, swimming pools and adult learning centres closing, their combined effects can be very significant. Further, we have seen changes towards "the marketization of education [and] a directive relationship between government and schools that potentially bypasses the participation of teachers in their own work and disengages schools from their local communities."[6] Whilst this runs in parallel (and often in tension with) many other initiatives such as making schools more inclusive and sustainable[7], it also makes it harder for schools to become part of a broader social infrastructure.

In parallel, how schools are commissioned in new developments often results in complex tensions between central government, local authorities and school operators dependent on a range of governance and funding frameworks. This can be a barrier to improved accessibility and thinking beyond the basic rental of school facilities for community use.

5- Deborah Ralls (2019) 'Becoming cooperative – challenges and insights: repositioning school behaviour as a collective endeavour' International Journal of Inclusive Education 23:11. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603116.2019.1629159?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journal-Code=ried20

6- Ainscow, Mel & Booth, Tony & Dyson, Alan. (2006). Inclusion and the standards agenda: Negotiating policy pressures in England. International Journal of Inclusive Education. 10. 295-308. p?

7- Ibid.