



# SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOL PLANNING

**A**lthough safety and educational appropriateness are the highest priorities for school facilities, the California Department of Education (CDE) also supports school district advancement of community sustainability via local engagement and collaborative planning.

## What Sustainable Communities Are

Sustainability reflects an understanding that the needs of the present must be met without compromising the ability of meeting future needs.<sup>1</sup>

Generally defined in the *California Public Resources Code*,<sup>2</sup> “sustainable communities” are those that promote equity, strengthen the economy, protect the environment, and promote public health and safety. They often utilize planning concepts such as smart growth, complete streets, mixed use, infill, brownfields, and transit-oriented development—all intended to encourage more walking and biking, efficient use of land, infrastructure, and multimodal transit, and a better jobs–housing balance.

## Statewide, Regional, and City/County Sustainable Communities Planning

California’s Strategic Growth Council brings together numerous state agencies with the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research to coordinate activities that support sustainable communities consistent with the State’s Planning Priorities.<sup>3</sup> Also with a goal of more sustainable communities, recent legislation<sup>4</sup> supports the State’s climate action efforts through coordinated transportation and land use planning. For example, the Air Resources Board is required to set regional targets for each of the 18 metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from cars. Each MPO must prepare a “sustainable communities strategy” (SCS) as part of its regional transportation plan. Within the SCS, land use, housing, and transportation plans are primarily aimed at reducing vehicle miles traveled by making more efficient use of land and infrastructure. Through their own general and specific plans, cities and counties are encouraged to implement the SCS. Local governments and developers are offered incentives, such as relief from certain environmental review requirements, for projects that are consistent with the SCS.



## Schools’ Role in Sustainable Communities

The location, accessibility, quality, maintenance, safety, and use of a school can have a significant impact on the health and well-being of a community. A school district can help advance its community’s sustainability goals by including:

- **Partnerships, Co-location, and Joint Use/Development:** Sharing resources and facilities are excellent ways to leverage public and private funding, reduce costs, and increase the amount and quality of community and education assets provided. A common example is joint use with parks, where schools can be built on smaller sites and have access to adjacent parkland and facilities for physical activity. It also can include opening up use of facilities on school sites during both school and nonschool hours for a variety of uses and services: pools, theaters, libraries, fitness centers, parking, health clinics, senior centers, and career-technical educational partnerships. Strategically co-located and offering a variety of uses, a school can become the center of a community and help reduce the number and length of vehicle trips otherwise required.
- **Promoting Active Transportation:** Safe routes to school promote active forms of transportation (e.g., walking and biking) with associated health benefits and reduced pollution and traffic near schools. Creating safe routes by removing existing barriers or mitigating safety issues is much more difficult and expensive to accomplish after construction than if the school is originally sited



and designed correctly. Working with local traffic planners is critical, and help is available in the form of technical resources, training, and funding from a variety of sources.<sup>5</sup>

District efforts may involve walkability audits, surveys on modes of transportation, safety curriculum, and program development such as the “walking school bus” and bicycle “train” (students accompanied by adults walking or bicycling on a safe route) and infrastructure or safety projects such as bike and skateboard racks, sidewalks, bike lanes, and lighting improvements.

- ▶ **Communication and Collaborative Planning:** Although some local planning agency notification or meeting is required by code,<sup>6</sup> continual two-way communication should be established to share plans and development and demographic data. Collaboration will help determine and plan for impacts from new development and coordination of schools with public facilities and services (such as parks and recreation, transit, and libraries) to maximize sustainable school and community benefits.

For example, proposed high-density infill projects may generate enrollment beyond existing schools’ capacities, or the location of magnet and charter schools or changes in school attendance boundaries may have impacts on busing, safe routes to school, and use of transit.

Districts should also request to be involved in city and county general plan updates and preparation and review of specific plans to help ensure the number and size of schools are adequate and in locations that are consistent with school siting standards.<sup>7</sup> In addition to staff contacts, a more formal and transparent collaboration with leadership, such as joint city council/board of supervisors, and school board meetings or subcommittees can be explored in which the city manager and mayor meet with the school board president and superintendent. These high-level meetings help build trust and enable the decision makers to understand and coordinate issues with a larger and more comprehensive perspective.

- ▶ **School Facilities Master Plan:** A school facilities master plan (SFMP) is an excellent starting place for collaboration and for setting and sharing with the city, county, and community the vision, goals, policies, and priorities for districtwide sustainable school planning. The SFMP provides comprehensive data on the district’s facilities needs and is a necessary tool in discussing how the city, county, and district can work together in locating, designing, and improving schools that will advance sustainability efforts. For example, modernizing older schools can contribute to the stability or revitalization of neighborhoods. The SFMP can also address closing and reuse of schools and thus should include local government and community input and involvement.

- ▶ **Sustainable School Facility Design and Operation:** In addition to helping meet sustainability goals of the larger community, schools themselves can also be designed and operated to conserve resources, provide open space, promote physical activity, protect the environment, and create healthy, quality learning spaces that support student achievement and lower life-cycle costs. They typically incorporate concepts such as “green,” “high performance,” and “zero net energy.” Designs can also be adaptable to accommodate increases in enrollment and evolving trends in education, technology, and community needs, thus supporting long-term sustainability.

Each new school or major addition or renovation project should be designed with an understanding of how the facilities will be used to support the staff, students, and community. Stakeholder input and school board adoption of an educational specification can contribute to this understanding. The education specification document will link the facility design to educational programs and community functions and can include requirements for sustainability features and operations.

By applying principles of sustainability in school facilities planning, school districts can have a significant, enduring, and positive impact on the communities they serve.

- 
1. Brundtland Commission, 1987.
  2. *California Public Resources Code* Section 75125.
  3. *California Government Code* Section 65041.
  4. Senate Bill 375 Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008.
  5. National Center for Safe Routes to Schools; Caltrans’ Active Transportation Program and *California Manual on Uniform Traffic*

*Control Devices*, Part 7; and Strategic Growth Council—Sustainable Communities Planning Grants.

6. *California Public Resources Code* Section 21151.2, *Government Code* sections 65352, 65352.2, and 65402; and *Education Code* Section 35275.
7. *California Code of Regulations*, Title 5, Section 14010.

---

For more information, contact the California Department of Education, School Facilities and Transportation Services Division, at 916-322-2470.