



POLICY BRIEF

Land for Granted:

The Effects of Acreage Policies on Rural Schools and Communities

By Barbara Kent Lawrence, Ed.D.

December 2003

RURAL TRUST POLICY BRIEF SERIES ON RURAL EDUCATION

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The Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) is the premier national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving rural communities. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging rural places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, advocates for appropriate state educational policies, and addresses the critical issue of funding for rural schools.



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Requirements for minimum acreage for school facility projects may logically be viewed as non-threatening for rural districts. After all, land in rural areas is, by definition, abundant, and sparsely populated. Unfortunately, this assumption takes rural land for granted. Rural land is often unsuitable for school sites and in many states much of it is public land held for other purposes. For many rural school districts, minimum acreage requirements pose significant practical problems.

The most damaging aspect of acreage policies is that they are part of a constellation of policies that encourage large schools on large sites and function to dismantle small schools. These include policies that make state aid for facilities contingent on minimum student enrollment, support new construction over renovation, and provide financial incentives for district consolidation.

This issue brief explores the implications of minimum acreage requirements for rural districts and communities, and suggests policy changes that can reduce or eliminate problems caused by poorly conceived minimum acreage regulations.

Overview of State Acreage Policies

Twenty-three states attach acreage requirements (or guidelines) to policies on school facilities¹ (CEFPI, 2003). Frequently, state approval for renovations and new construction is contingent on meeting these regulations, among others. In some states, meeting an acreage requirement is a prerequisite for obtaining state aid for school building projects.

The majority of states with acreage guidelines follow recommendations made in 1953 by the Council of Educational Facility Planners, International (CEFPI).² They suggest a minimum of 10 acres for elementary schools, 20 acres for middle schools and 30 acres for high schools, plus one additional acre per 100 students. These 50-year-old CEFPI guidelines have been revised, but most state and local acreage policies still reflect the old recommendations. The latest CEFPI guide does not contain specific amounts for recommended acreage (CEFPI, in press).

There are many policy variations among states, which also complicates matters. Idaho, for example, suggests 5, 10 and 20 acres for elementary, middle and high schools, respectively, with greater acreage for larger school enrollments; whereas, in North Carolina, the recommended acreage is 10, 15 and 30 acres.

Though most states require 30 acres for high schools, some states require much more acreage. Minnesota, for example, suggests 60 acres of land for very large high schools (those with over 2,000 students). Similarly, large high schools in California (over 2,400 students) need almost 53 acres.

***Mandates? Guidelines?
Recommendations? Or Suggestions?***

“[A] survey of 15 school districts that passed school-building referenda between 1995 and 1998 found that a majority of the school districts chose to build new schools in undeveloped areas on the edge of the city or village limits. The...study revealed that one of the factors driving this trend is a belief on the part of school district administrators that minimum acreage ‘guidelines’ developed by the Council for Educational Facilities Planning [sic] International (CEFPI) are actually inflexible mandates.”

1000 Friends of Wisconsin and the Land Use Institute, 2002, p. 2

Some states differentiate between existing schools and new construction. Alabama, for example, lowers the acreage requirements for additions or renovations to existing schools. And in several states, (e.g., Alaska, Idaho, and California) the per-pupil acreage required for small schools is higher than that for large schools.

In almost all states, the school facility policies allow for exemptions or alternatives to state-required acreage. It can be difficult for rural districts to obtain an exemption, however, and there is ongoing confusion even among state officials about whether their acreage guidelines are mandates or merely recommendations. Even interviews conducted by CEFPI and the Rural Trust with state facility personnel reveal some confusion about this issue. In some states, acreage is “recommended,” though local school officials treat these recommendations as though mandated. In other states, the guidance in the CEFPI manual is believed to be state sanctioned.

Whether driven by the previous CEFPI recommendations or state policy, new schools tend to be larger buildings, located on larger sites. In South Carolina, for example, schools constructed within the past 30 years consume 33 percent more land per pupil than older facilities (Kouri, 1999). And similarly, in North Carolina, schools built in the past 15 years are located on sites that average over 70 acres, while older schools have a median site size of 27 acres (J. Lora, personal

communication, March 20, 25, 26, 2003; C. Howley, personal communication, March 25, 2003).

Thus, the belief that “bigger is better” for school enrollment is also applied to school site requirements. This trend puts pressure on existing small rural schools that want and need to renovate or expand. When state funding and/or state approval is contingent on meeting minimum acreage guidelines, then small schools located on smaller sites may be forced to find other locations or consolidate in order to meet the needs of their district.

**Problems of Minimum Acreage Policies
for Small and Rural Districts**

Policies requiring minimum acreage for school building projects impose serious problems for existing small and rural schools and communities because they tend to:

1. Promote large schools and encourage consolidation of small schools and districts;
2. Move schools out of existing population centers, farther from the communities they serve;
3. Remove control over the size and location of schools from the local communities they serve;
4. Place new and costly financial burdens on rural taxpayers; and
5. Move schools onto undeveloped rural land, which can contribute to suburban sprawl and cause disruption or destruction of rural culture and livelihoods.

1. Acreage policies promote large schools and encourage consolidation of small schools and districts.

Though almost 69 percent of schools in the United States have been closed since 1940 (Bailey, 2000; Howley & Bickel, 2001), many rural communities are still served by small schools. These schools are frequently located within small towns or villages—places where meeting requirements for excessive acreage is difficult or impossible. Acreage policies actually create incentives to close and consolidate rural and small schools: either these schools find a way to provide more land or they risk losing state aid or state approval for a needed facility project.

*Impact of Former CEFPI Guidelines on Acreage for Small Schools**

Number of Students	Total Acreage per School			Acreage per Student		
	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
200	12	22	32	.060	.110	.160
400	14	24	34	.035	.060	.085
600	16	26	36	.027	.043	.060
800	18	28	38	.023	.035	.048
1000	20	30	40	.020	.030	.040
1200	22	32	42	.018	.027	.035
1400	24	34	44	.017	.024	.031
1600	26	36	46	.016	.023	.029
1800	28	38	48	.016	.021	.027
2000	30	40	50	.015	.020	.025

*Based on acreage guidelines of:

Elementary School

10 acres + 1 acre per 100 students

Middle School/Junior High

20 acres + 1 acre per 100 students

High School

30 acres + 1 acre per 100 students

Some of this pressure on small schools is the result of acreage formulas themselves. Most acreage formulas place a higher burden per pupil on smaller schools than on larger schools.

Using the old CEFPI guidelines, for example, a middle school of 200 students would have to find a site of 22 acres, or .11 acres per student. A middle school serving 600 students, however, would only have to provide a site of 26 acres, or .043 acres per student. A high school serving 200 students would have to offer 32 acres, or .16 acres per student, while a high school serving 2,000 students would only be required to provide a site of 50 acres, or .025 acres per student. The chart above shows this relationship.

2. Acreage policies move schools out of existing population centers, farther from the communities they serve.

To meet acreage requirements, schools must often be moved out of existing population centers and farther away from the communities they serve. This dislocation can weaken ties between the local community and schools. It also can make it more difficult for parents to remain engaged with their children's schools. For

students, relocating away from population centers results in longer bus rides and all the problems associated with this (such as lower participation in after-school activities, longer school days, etc.). None of these consequences are positive, and all threaten to dismantle some of the recognized benefits of rural schooling.

In addition, removing local schools from small towns and villages weakens them economically (Lyson, 2002). Closing schools can erode the tax base, deplete remaining schools of resources, and reduce property values in areas where they were located. Studies indicate that closing a local school in a small town often means losing both a major employer with a significant annual budget and payroll and the income from purchases by the school and its employees (Lawrence et al, 2002). In addition, when a school closes, the value of local property declines, hastening the exodus of young families from the area and limiting its ability to attract newcomers.

3. Acreage policies remove local control over the size and location of schools.

Acreage policies that dictate the size of school sites diminish local control over the size and location of schools that serve these communities

Some rural communities may wish to build a new school on a larger site. Others may wish to maintain the current location within a village. Still others may want to build a new facility within a small town on a small site and use offsite community locations for sports and other school functions. Thus, one main problem of acreage requirements is that *state policies* determine what school sites should look like, and may not reflect decisions made by the local community. Whether to relocate schools or keep them in existing locations should be a community decision.

4. Acreage policies place new and costly financial burdens on rural taxpayers.

Acreage policies that require relocation of a school to a

***A New School in Traverse City,
Wisconsin—but No Money to Get There***

Sometimes costs can remain “hidden” even to professional planners, architects, and educators.

“When communities plan new school facilities, it is important that they account for the full costs of moving the school out of the town center.... Tax dollars required to bus students out to distant schools, for example, are typically not included in decisions to relocate. Neither is the larger community cost of building and maintaining new roads and other infrastructure that comes when residential and commercial development follow outlying schools. Traverse City recently built a second high school, for example, on farmland outside the city limits. Not long after the new Traverse City West Senior High School opened, the school district could no longer afford to provide transportation to the high school, which is too far for walking or bike riding.” Two years later, in August 2001, the district was finally able to provide busing.

Miller, J., 2001, p.2

The Limited Impact of Impact Fees

“A recent study of the cost of sprawl in Washington State concluded that school costs were the number one ‘hidden cost’ of sprawl in the state. [The study] found that for the Issaquah School District, providing education cost \$18,600 for each new single-family house. However, the impact fees paid by developers—fees meant to recoup the cost of providing services and structures—ranged from a piddly \$1,100 to a modest \$6,140. This leaves a burden of roughly \$12,000 per household to be paid for by the state’s taxpayers.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. The Sierra Club’s study of Colorado’s Front Range finds similar trends. In three separate districts in Larimer County per-student costs totaled between \$10,874 and \$12,500—yet the fees charged to the developers totaled between \$0 and \$446.”

Sierra Club, 2002, p.1

new site can be very costly for local communities. The most obvious additional costs for districts are for land and for the actual building. However, there are other “hidden” costs.

These less obvious costs include expenses for infrastructures such as roads for increased traffic, sewage systems, water and utility systems, and public services such as police and fire protection.

The costs of building large schools outside communities are frequently underestimated because schools affect so many infrastructure services, and because they are funded by a variety of sources. A study of eight rural counties in states across the country uncovered a variety of costs and problems associated with building larger schools outside existing population centers. These problems include congestion of transportation routes; the need to pave gravel roads; increased pollution; the need to extend sewer systems; concerns about infrastructure costs affecting business growth; the decreasing supply of affordable housing; and the costs of public services such as police, fire and health. “A typical complaint was that police were too few to cover the area outside the municipalities, and volunteer fire departments were struggling to meet growing service needs” (Reeder et al., 2001, p. 202).

Research indicates that, “One of the biggest problems for most of these [rural] places was their relatively slow growth in tax base compared with their growth in public spending needs” (Reeder et al., 2001, p. 205). For example, one study found that growing rural communities in Pennsylvania lack the commercial base to adequately fund schools needed for expanding student enrollment (10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, 2002). Many communities have attempted to cover these additional costs through impact fees for developers, though this additional revenue does little to cover actual expenses.

Although state aid may help with construction costs, expenses for infrastructure and services tend to be ongoing and are usually assumed by local taxpayers. According to Dick Esseks, Professor of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University, “You usually can’t get enough of these scattered home sites per linear mile to cover the cost [of road maintenance], so people in incorporated areas are actually paying more taxes in order to subsidize road maintenance for the new homes in rural areas” (Beaumont, 2001, p. 2).

5. Acreage policies contribute to suburban sprawl and cause disruption or destruction of rural culture and livelihoods.

Sprawl is often viewed as a suburban problem, but it is actually a rural issue. Typically, suburban sprawl results in rural areas being subsumed by expanding suburban communities. This issue has environmental, public health, economic and cultural implications that are beyond the scope of this issue brief. However, to the extent that acreage requirements encourage new schools to be located outside of existing population centers, they may be harbingers of sprawl.

Policy Recommendations

In spite of a growing recognition of the benefits of small schools, many policies, either intentionally or unintentionally, create incentives to replace small school with larger ones. Policies that mandate or recommend minimum acreage for school sites are examples of these flawed policies.

The following recommendations suggest ways to rectify problems that impact rural and small schools from misguided acreage policies.

What Is Sprawl?

“Sprawl is dispersed, low-density development that is generally located at the fringe of an existing settlement and over large areas of previously rural landscape. It is characterized by segregated land uses and dominated by the automobile.

Sprawl is a rural issue as much, if not more, than it is an urban one. It seems a strangely overlooked fact that sprawl is exclusively built on lands previously reserved for rural uses. Urban communities feel the effects of sprawl in indirect ways. They lose populations, sales revenues, and tax base. On the receiving end, rural areas feel the direct effects of sprawl. Previously productive farms or timberland are eaten up by dispersed houses, parking lots, and monolithic stores. Tree-lined country lanes are clogged, widened, and clogged again, as historic stone fences, bridges, and trees are removed. Small town centers that previously served populations of fewer than 1,000 are sucked dry by stores each with more square footage than the entire town. While urban areas are left with a shell that may be returned to life, rural landscapes are sliced and bulldozed beyond recognition or restoration.”

The Rural Heritage Program, 2002, p. 1, 3

1. Eliminate Acreage Requirements

In the best-case scenario, state approval for school facility projects would not include acreage requirements. There is no clear purpose for these requirements, and these restrictions can be more harmful than beneficial, especially for small rural schools.

States do help finance school building projects, and they should have some role in approving local projects. However, state approval should be based on educationally sound criteria. Some states do this. For example, Maine approves sites that meet all health and safety criteria. Vermont’s policies make site approval contingent on meeting the needs of educational programs. And Oklahoma policies encourage the use of other public spaces (such as parks and recreation lands) for school uses.

Some states have avoided acreage minimums, or are eliminating them. The following states currently have no acreage requirements: Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and Vermont.

2. Provide Exemptions from Acreage Requirements

If acreage guidelines remain, state policies should allow for exemptions, and the exemptions should be well publicized. Most states do permit exemptions to acreage minimums, though many of these exemptions are available only to urban schools, and many local education agencies operate as if unaware of these options. State policies can be written to be more explicit about exceptions to general recommendations and/or requirements.

There are a few good models of acreage policies with explicit exemptions. In Georgia, for example, though large sites are considered to be advantageous, the approval committee can grant a waiver for a school site in a high-density area. New York State recommendations for acreage do not apply to New York City schools, and variances can be granted upon written request. Minnesota provides alternatives and different allowances for urban and rural schools. North Carolina recognizes that urban districts may not be able to meet the recommendations, and Oklahoma recognizes that in urban places the cost of land may be prohibitive and the recommended acreage may be unrealistic. Policymakers must understand that acreage requirements are an imposition on rural communities and that waivers must be available to all districts.

3. Redirect Growth

State policy can help guide new development in environmentally and educationally beneficial directions. Some states direct construction of schools away from areas they want to protect and encourage renovation over new construction. For example, California's Williamson Act of 1996 forbids school construction in Farmland Security Zones. Maryland, in an effort to "save rural regions from over-development... seldom funds school projects in areas not already served by public water and sewer" (Mastrull, 2002, p. 2).

4. Encourage Renovation

In general, policies that favor construction of large new schools rather than renovation of older smaller facilities have disastrous impacts on small rural schools. There are, however, models for doing the opposite—encouraging renovation. For example, Maryland encourages the reuse of existing buildings. As result of its Public School Construction Program, developed in 1995, by 1998, 84 percent of Maryland funds for school construction were used for improvements to existing facilities (Sierra Club, 2002, p. 1).

Maine also provides an excellent alternative policy. Legislation passed in 1997 makes it easier to renovate existing schools and "locate new schools in built-up neighborhoods." The state promotes investing in town and city centers because it recognizes that it is less expensive to do so than to build new facilities in undeveloped rural places (Maine State Planning Office, 1997, p. 14).

5. Form Partnerships

Much of the impetus for larger tracts of land for schools is probably the result of the desire and need for extensive athletic fields and parking. Sports teams are an important focus of civic pride and an excellent activity for many students; however, space for practice and competition need not dominate site decisions for schools. Furthermore, schools located closer to communities need less space for bus and automobile parking than those cited in outlying areas.

Districts and the communities can form partnerships that are mutually beneficial, less costly, make better use of public resources, and avoid relocating schools onto large undeveloped land parcels removed from town centers. For example, students can use public parks, pools, playgrounds, athletic fields and other recreational areas if they are sited nearby.

Many schools already take advantage of this cost-cutting method (Lawrence, 2002, 2003; Nathan & Febey, 2002). In a similar fashion, school facilities such as cafeterias, meeting rooms, media centers and libraries, gymnasiums, fitness centers, tracks, fields and pools can all be used by community people, who are often more likely to share in construction and maintenance

expenses if they also share in the immediate benefits (Lawrence, 2003).

Some states are beginning to encourage these partnerships. Oklahoma, for example, is explicit about the benefits of sharing arrangements and includes language in its acreage policy that encourages cooperation between schools and neighboring parks, with the goal of joint use of common facilities.

6. Make Site Selection a Local Decision

A “one size fits all” policy generally fits no situation well, and even flexible policies can be narrowly interpreted. The best solution may be the one several states follow—no policy at all, or one that makes site selection a local decision.

Local communities understand the context, culture and implications of their local schools far better than policymaking bodies at a county or state level. The state can help by providing accurate information and support, but fundamental decisions about school facilities need to remain local.

Conclusions

People do take land for granted, especially in rural areas. And though rural areas by definition do have a great deal of undeveloped land that does not mean acreage requirements for school facility projects are benign. Quite the contrary. These policies can force the closure of small schools, move schools out of town centers, take local control away from communities, increase tax burdens for citizens and contribute to problems of sprawl.

Acreage minimums are yet one more type of policy that make it difficult for small rural, community-centered schools to remain viable and survive in a “bigger is better” world. Schools can play an essential role in conserving the fundamental rural assets: land and people. If unchanged, however, existing state policy on minimum acreage for school sites can continue to damage both in many states.

Endnotes

1 CEFPI has conducted a policy inventory of all states and their acreage policies. This inventory is available on its Web site at www.cefpi.org/pdf/state_guidelines.pdf.

2 CEFPI is a professional group specifically devoted to school facilities. Its guidelines and recommendations are highly regarded and influential.

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