

Education Innovations Report

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Prepared for: Seattle Downtown Regional
Center Plan

Prepared by: BAE Urban Economics

Memorandum

To: Erica Bush, Urban Planner/Urban Designer

From: Lauren Beduhn, Associate
Paul Peninger, Principal

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Re: Innovative Strategies For Expanding K-12 Educational Facilities in Downtown Seattle

Introduction

Planning for the development or expansion of K through 12 public schools presents a complex set of challenges. School districts must balance high costs and long construction timelines with the uncertainty of future enrollment and neighborhood growth. Furthermore, funding for capital projects is often limited and requires voter approval. These challenges are especially pronounced in Downtown Seattle, which currently has no public schools located in its neighborhoods but is projected to undergo significant residential growth in the coming decades. If the City of Seattle intends to support an increase in family households and school-age children in this area, it will need to proactively explore opportunities for expanding educational infrastructure. Building on findings from the Public Facilities and Services Analysis prepared for the Downtown Seattle Regional Center Plan, this memo 1) highlights policy goals related to K-12 schools, 2) outlines the Seattle Public Schools' (SPS) current facilities planning process, and 3) *explores innovative strategies employed in other school districts to deliver new schools.*

Planning Goals Related to K-12 Education

Multiple planning efforts have set goals related to K-12 public education opportunities in the City of Seattle and Downtown Seattle specifically. The following section of this analysis highlights relevant goals from the Draft Downtown Goals and Policy Directions, the One Seattle Plan, and the One Seattle Plan Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The Draft Downtown Goals and Policy Directions emphasize the importance of promoting housing growth in Downtown Seattle, with a particular focus on neighborhood design that supports family households. Goal 1.3 of the Draft Downtown Goals and Policy Directions is to "Evolve Downtown neighborhoods to better meet the diverse needs of all residents and families," and Policy 1.3.2 is to "Expand family-focused services and experiences, particularly around housing and transit." Given that proximity to quality K-12 education is typically highly valued by family households and considering the current absence of public schools in

Downtown, these goals could be advanced through investment in K-12 educational opportunities in the area.

The One Seattle Plan highlights the need for ongoing coordination with SPS to accurately project the size and distribution of future student populations and to effectively address the evolving demand for K-12 education over the next 20 years. Additionally, it provides the recommendations below to improve and expand educational opportunities for K-12 students:

- CF 6.2 - Explore opportunities to reduce the costs of developing new schools, such as identifying surplus properties that could be available for school sites.
- CF 6.3 - Facilitate zoning and permitting processes that support the development of new or renovated schools, and where providing non-educational community benefits, the adaptive reuse of any surplus schools.
- CF 6.4 - Collaborate with SPS and the community to explore if underutilized or surplus school buildings and properties can be redeveloped for other purposes, such as affordable housing, childcare, workforce development opportunities or enhancements for public safety.
- CF 6.5 - Expand opportunities for joint use by the City and SPS of buildings, playing fields, and other facilities.
- CF 6.6 - Coordinate pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to make it easy and safe for students and families to walk, bike, and roll to school.
- CF 6.7 - Encourage more walking, biking, and transit ridership for students, teachers, and staff.
- CF 6.8 - Support efforts to transition SPS buildings, operations, and transportation from fossil fuels towards 100% zero-carbon electricity.

Of the One Seattle Plan goals related to K-12 education, this analysis specifically addresses CF 6.2 by presenting innovative school delivery models that have been successful in other school districts.

The One Seattle EIS addresses the impacts of the One Seattle Plan on the city's education facilities and provides recommendations to mitigate any negative impacts. The One Seattle EIS acknowledges that although SPS student enrollment has declined over the last five years, population growth through 2044 has the potential to increase student enrollment in various areas throughout the City. It further states that if enrollment projections illustrate exceedance of school capacity, then SPS would respond as they have in the past by adjusting school boundaries, adding or removing portables, adding/renovating buildings, reopening closed buildings or schools, and/or pursuing future capital programs. In addition to these actions, the One Seattle EIS suggests the following mitigation measures:

- The City could implement a school impact fee to help pay for the development of new classrooms if they are needed in the future.

- The City could help identify interim uses for existing underutilized classrooms so that the school district can hold onto them in case they are needed in the future.
- The City could incentivize provision of public schools in centers in vertical formats, where new schools are needed.
- The City could also allow for greater heights at existing school locations where demand increases. Goals would be to protect recreation and tree canopy while allowing for more student classroom capacity.
- The City could update development standards and review processes for new schools in order to make it easier to add classrooms or build new schools if they are needed in the future.
- As part of development standards for new place types such as neighborhood centers and corridors, the City could enhance street crossing including walking routes to schools in areas with added housing.
- The City could identify specific objectives to assist Seattle Public Schools in acquiring and developing new schools if needed.

Although SPS leads public school planning and development, these policy goals suggest a need for new K–12 education opportunities and identify ways the City of Seattle can facilitate the creation of new K-12 schools. The following section addresses SPS’s facility planning process and funding process for school capital improvements, as well as its relevance to K-12 education opportunities in Downtown Seattle.

Seattle Public Schools Facility Planning

SPS manages the capital planning process for public schools in the City of Seattle. SPS receives funding from the state, federal government, property taxes, City of Seattle programs, and individual donors. All capital improvements - building expansion, replacement, and upgrades – as well as technology advancements are funded outside of SPS’s annual operating budget primarily through property tax levies, referred to as the Building Excellence (BEX) Capital Levy and the Buildings, Technology, and Academics/Athletics (BTA) Capital Levy. These levies are contingent on approval from the Seattle School Board and Seattle voters. SPS levies are typically collected over a six-year period and each levy is placed on the ballot on an alternating three-year schedule.¹

In February 2025, Seattle voters approved the most recent levy, Building Excellence VI Capital Levy (BEX VI). This levy will finance almost \$1.4 billion in capital improvements and \$415 million in technology advancements across public schools in the City of Seattle. This funding can only go towards projects specified in the levy work plan. With respect to the eight public schools that serve Downtown, there is one planned project that will improve school capacity, the addition and modernization of Lowell Elementary School. Other projects for schools that

¹ <https://www.seattleschools.org/about/levy/capital-levies/>

serve Downtown include technology upgrades, clean energy projects, athletic field improvements, and cafeteria updates.²

SPS's ten-year Facilities Master Plan informs which projects are included in BEX and BTA. This plan recommends facility improvements based on a variety of factors, such as policy directives, program needs, building conditions, and enrollment projections. Of these factors, enrollment projections are crucial for determining the future capacity of SPS's facilities and whether schools can accommodate new growth. At the time of the most recent Facilities Master Plan update in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic caused enrollment declines and created uncertainty about future enrollment trends. Thus, SPS did not publish projections for this plan update.³

Since the 2021 Facilities Master Plan update, SPS released updated enrollment projections. The SPS Enrollment Planning Department develops enrollment projections annually, which include 10-year projection of total students residing and enrolled in the district and one- and five-year projections per each school. The projections are based on historical enrollment, birth rates, housing information, major employers, city planning projects, and other factors. The most recent projections available on SPS's website illustrate declining total district enrollment between the 2023 to 2024 and 2033 to 2034 school years. Between the 2023 to 2024 and 2028 to 2029 school years, SPS estimates that five out of the eight schools serving Downtown will decline in enrollment. Edmond S. Meany Middle School is projected to experience the largest enrollment decline at 15 percent, while Bailey Gatzert Elementary is expected to see the greatest growth, with a 21 percent increase.

If the City of Seattle aims to create K–12 public schools in Downtown Seattle, this need would first need to be identified through a future facilities master planning process. Enrollment projections would likely need to demonstrate significant student growth in the Downtown area to justify investment. Additionally, funding for any Downtown school projects would require approval by the Seattle School Board and Seattle voters through the capital levies process, with the next levy anticipated to go before voters in 2031.

In recent years, declining student enrollment, among other factors, has prompted SPS to propose school closures and consolidations. In this context, proactively planning for K–12 school expansion in Downtown may require pursuing innovative funding strategies beyond SPS's facilities planning and capital levy process.

² <https://www.seattleschools.org/about/levy/bex-vi-capital-levy-planning/>

³ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.seattleschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021_Facilities_Master_Plan_Update.pdf

Case Studies : New York City Education Construction Fund and Prince George's County P3 Strategies

School districts and other public agencies have adopted innovative approaches to deliver new high-quality schools while managing financial constraints and limited land availability. This section discusses two of these approaches: 1) leveraging public-private partnerships (P3) to deliver new schools and 2) collaborating with community agencies to share school space and resources.

Various school districts have leveraged P3 delivery models to develop and construct school facilities. The structure of these partnerships can vary greatly but generally involve a private developer constructing or renovating a facility and leasing it to the school district over a long period of time.⁴ P3 models can offer development and construction cost savings, as well as streamlined project schedules. However, they also involve complex legal and financial arrangements and must be tailored to meet the unique needs and characteristics of each school district.⁵ Notable P3 models include the work of the Education Construction Fund in New York City beginning in the 1960s and the more recent P3 arrangement in Prince George's County Public Schools beginning in 2020.

New York City has a long history of collaborating with the private sector to build new school facilities through the Education Construction Fund (ECF), a public benefit corporation formed in 1966. The goal of the ECF is to provide new school buildings and other public benefits by utilizing P3 to pair new schools with housing or commercial developments. By doing so, the ECF aims to expand education opportunities without tapping into the city's capital budget.

In the ECF's P3 structure, the corporation leases its unused development rights to a private developer, who is then responsible for constructing both a new school and accompanying residential or commercial space, typically located above or adjacent to the school. The ECF, which operates outside of the city's debt limit, issues bonds to finance the school's construction and pays off the bonds over time through rental income and tax equivalency payments from the developer.

According to ECF's website, the corporation has delivered over 18,000 school seats, 4,500 housing units, and 1.2 million square feet of office space in the City of New York. However, Schindler, notes that the ECF's P3 model has limitations.⁶ More specifically, this model is only successful in areas with high land values that can generate sufficient rent incomes. To provide new schools in areas with low land values or to provide schools paired with affordable housing, additional financing may be required.

⁴ Education Evolving, Facilities Financing: New Models for Districts that are Creating Schools New, 2004.

⁵ Bonvechio, Can Public-Private Partnerships Work in K-12?, 2021.

⁶ The Private Lives of Public Schools, 2019.

In contrast to ECF's school development process, Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) utilized P3 to construct six new schools without incorporating a mixed-use development component. In 2020, in response to aging school facilities and growing education needs, PGCPS entered into an agreement with a private development team to deliver the schools under a design-build-finance-maintain (DBFM) alternative financing model.⁷ According to a press release from PGCPS, the private partners completed construction of all six schools in 2023.

Upon school occupancy, PGCPS began making availability payments, funded through its capital budget and with additional contributions from the County.⁸ While PGCPS retains ownership of the schools, its private partners are responsible for maintenance throughout the duration of the contract. This innovative partnership saved PGCPS approximately \$383 million in design and construction costs, eliminated deferred maintenance expenses, and reduced the school delivery timeline by half.

A P3 school delivery model could be adopted to facilitate the development of new schools in Downtown Seattle. Pursuing mixed-use projects similar to those executed by the ECF, specifically projects that pair housing with new schools, could address housing demand and support projected residential growth in Downtown. Furthermore, Downtown Seattle's high land values may generate the required revenue to sustain these types of projects. Leveraging a DBFM P3 structure like that of PGCPS has the potential to reduce the project management burden on public administrators, reduce upfront costs, and respond more quickly to demand for new school facilities.

Despite these advantages, Bonvechio, in his review of the PGCPS P3 model, cautions that P3 deal structures are highly complex and involve significant risk-sharing, with successful outcomes relying on long-term partnerships and high levels of collaboration.⁹ To ensure a successful P3 school delivery model, Bonvechio recommends that these partnerships should have the following characteristics:

- A clear definition of expected outcomes from the parties involved.
- Sufficient development time for a district to negotiate the structure and required legal agreements of the project.
- A true partnership where both parties have mutual respect and consideration for each other, and are invested in each other's success.
- Honesty, as nothing can cause a P3 to implode faster than a lack of trust among the parties.

⁷ Bonvechio, Can Public-Private Partnerships Work in K-12?, 2021.

⁸ A Guide to K-12 Public-Private-Partnerships, Brailsford and Dunlavy.

⁹ Bonvechio, Can Public-Private Partnerships Work in K-12?, 2021.

- A fair and equitable contract/management agreement where expectations are clearly spelled out, allowing both parties to know exactly what is expected and how success will be measured.
- A close working relationship, because the private sector partner must have support from and access to district leaders.
- Realistic and clearly defined milestones that allow for the multi-layered review and approval process that many districts and school systems have.
- An intentionally designed project, defined by the school district.
- Flexibility, as the district should carefully define its needs and in responding to those needs, the private sector partner should have latitude to shop for the most cost-effective solutions available.

In addition to utilizing P3, school districts can address funding challenges by co-locating schools with other facilities, such as community organizations, higher education, and local businesses.¹⁰ Space-sharing education models can spread facility operations and maintenance costs across multiple agencies. When these models also employ adaptive reuse of community space – such as churches, community centers, and colleges campus – school districts can substantially reduce facility development and construction costs.

In addition to cost-savings, space sharing models can offer public benefits that transcend student education. Pairing schools with organizations that offer community services can repair fragmented service delivery, improving access to resources for families. Additionally, schools developed from community-based organizations can be more responsive to local needs and create a sense of belonging for students historically “othered” by public education.

El Puente, a community-based organization located in Brooklyn, New York, successfully implemented a space sharing education model by partnering with the New York City Department of Education in the 1990s. El Puente was founded in 1982 to promote community activism and empowerment for the Southside Williamsburg Latino community. It was founded by Luis Garden Acosta and other community members in response to rising crime in the community following the loss of industry and disruptive urban renewal programs.¹¹

After operating a successful after-school program for 10 years, El Puente opened a high school in 1993, the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, in a renovated church which also served as a community headquarters. El Puente also transformed and led the operations of

¹⁰ Education Evolving, Facilities Financing: New Models for Districts that are Creating Schools New, 2004.

¹¹ Ancess & Rogers, Social emotional learning and social justice learning at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, 2015.

Middle School 50 starting in 2015. Since these schools' inception, El Puente has accelerated student performance and attendance and is consistently an A-rated NYC school.¹²

The success of El Puente's model is largely attributed to its responsiveness to community needs and deviation from "one size fits all" education. The Academy and MS50's curriculum celebrates local culture and language, cultivating a sense of belonging for students. The small school size and involvement of teachers, staff, and parents in the decision-making process fosters higher levels of student engagement in learning. El Puente also offers counseling and support services for students and families and has a long history of leading social activist movements relevant to the local community's values.¹³

El Puente's innovative education model and other similar space sharing initiatives could be well-suited for the needs of Downtown Seattle. Co-locating a public school within an existing community building could offer the potential to create or expand education spaces without relying entirely on the capital levy process. Furthermore, given that no public schools currently exist within Downtown's boundaries, a tailored model like this could provide a much-needed resource for families living in the area. Finally, as noted in the Public Facilities and Services Analysis, previous studies have noted the issue of fragmented service delivery for under resourced communities in Downtown. Shared space education models can improve resource access and collaboration among multiple providers by responding to multiple community needs in a single facility.

¹² Lopez, *Belonging in Schools Building a school where all students belong in New York City's Williamsburg*, 2023.