

Planning and Designing a Community School to Promote Healthy Lifestyles

DESIGN
COMPETITION
PERTH AMBOY
PUBLIC
HIGH SCHOOL
WWW.PAPS.NET/COMPETITION

August 2004

City of Perth Amboy
Mayor Joseph Vas

a report to the
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The nation's youth are largely inactive, unfit, and increasingly overweight. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that between the late 1970s and 2000 the percent of overweight children between 6-11 more than doubled, while the percent of overweight adolescents tripled. The serious health threats and economic burden of the child obesity epidemic affect some groups more than others, however. The at-risk population is disproportionately Black and Hispanic, and low income.¹ Lack of physical activity is a risk factor for the health problems associated with obesity. Studies show that participation in physical activity declines dramatically during adolescence. This suggests that interventions to prevent obesity and promote physical activity should target low income children and youth of color.²

Schools are good sites for health promotion strategies targeting at risk youth, both for their scope and their potential impact, as nearly all children must attend school. The CDC recommends that schools and communities should coordinate their efforts to make the best use of their resources to "provide physical and social environments that encourage and enable safe and enjoyable physical activity," and notes that one way to achieve this is to form a coalition.³

This report describes a promising model using a school facility project as the catalyst for organizing such a coalition in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The "Perth Amboy model" evolved around a project to facilitate an inclusive planning process that would guide a national design competition for a new high school to serve as a center for this former industrial city, which is home to a fast-growing, low-income, predominantly Latino population.⁴

That project, a partnership between the City of Perth Amboy and the Perth Amboy Public School District, began with a Community School Smart Growth planning grant from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA). Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the New Jersey School Construction Corporation supported the national design competition—which 200 architects entered, including top names in the field. The competition demonstrates that it is possible to engage significant community input and to encourage innovative, activity friendly designs (rather than conform to a cookie cutter model) without adding to the time or cost involved in school procurement. It models a process that can be replicated in other New Jersey cities and towns, and other states with similar school construction programs—to redress decades of disinvestment in poor, predominantly minority and urban communities.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided funding, through the New Jersey Walks Program, to take advantage of the high school design competition to raise awareness about the opportunities that exist in the design and programming of the new school to promote health, especially by supporting more routine physical activity. To do this we organized a Healthy School and Lifestyle Committee which developed a multi-pronged plan, as part of the overall planning process. Substantially all of their recommendations for the facility were approved

by the state Department of Education as eligible for state funding.

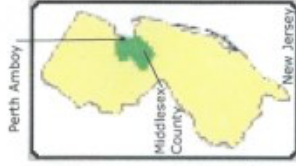
Just as the second stage of the competition was getting underway, The Healthy Schools and Lifestyles Committee reorganized to continue its work as the Community School Collaborative for Healthy Adolescents, with a full time coordinator and student advisory group. The Collaborative is now poised to coordinate the work of the various partners involved with implementation of new programs and the reorganization of the school as seven small learning communities.

Policy Context

The new Perth Amboy High School (PAHS) will be built as part of New Jersey's \$8.6 billion Abbott school construction program. This enormous undertaking has its origins in the state Supreme Court's historic rulings in the Abbott v. Burke case, ordering the most comprehensive package of educational reforms in the nation.⁵ In 1990 the Court directed the state to provide facilities for public school children in 30 "special needs districts" — the poorest in the state — "that will be sufficient to enable these students to achieve the substantive standards that now define a thorough and efficient education" as defined by the state's Core Curriculum Standards (CCS). The CCS acknowledge the inter-related nature of the education, social, and health needs of students, as well as the necessity to respond to the public health problem of obesity and physical inactivity through preventive measures.

Moreover the state Supreme Court also ordered Abbott districts to implement Whole School Reform (WSR) — a comprehensive redesign effort involving the participation of all members of the school community — as well as to provide supplemental programs to make up for past gaps and address the *particular needs* of each community. In other words, the formation of community school coalitions to link the creation of "activity friendly" school environments with strategies to improve academic performance and strengthen fragile families, is an essential strategy for Abbott implementation —and so this work should be eligible for state funding.

As New Jersey leads the nation in reforming urban education and building the next generation of urban schools, lessons from the "Perth Amboy model" will be very timely to guide both policy and practice.



¹ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. 2000. "Health Disparities: Bridging the Gap."

US Department of Health and Human Services. Public Health Service. September. Washington, DC.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2001. *The Surgeon General's call to action to prevent and decrease overweight and obesity*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General.

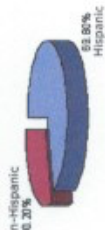
³ CDC. 1997. "Guidelines for School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Recommendations and Reports*, 46(RR-6): 1-36.

⁴ For a detailed case study of this project, from which portions of this report are excerpted, see Shoshkes,

E. 2004. *Schools and Smart Growth: Creating Communities of Learning*. Available in PDF format at www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/AbbottSchoolFacilities/FacilitiesPages/FacilitiesResources.htm

⁵ For information on the Abbott litigation and the court ordered reforms see the website of the Education Law Center at: www.edlawcenter.org

Perth Amboy Population By Hispanic Origin



Foreign Born Population



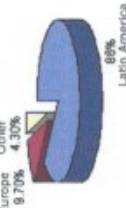
Date of Arrival: Foreign Born Population



Citizenship: Foreign Born Population



Region of Birth: Foreign Born Population



Nearly one quarter of the city's adult population has less than a ninth grade education, which is four times the state's average. Only 10 percent have at least a Bachelor's degree. As a result of lack of education and poor language skills the unemployment rate in Perth Amboy has been at least twice that in the county and state over the past decade, despite the strength of the regional economy. (Middlesex County, the second largest in the state in terms of employment, is projected to lead the state in employment growth.)² In part due to unemployment, 20 percent of Perth Amboy residents lack health insurance, which is strongly associated with lack of access to preventive and primary health care.³ Nearly half (46%) of Perth Amboy adults are overweight, which is more than double the national average. Nine percent have a personal history of diabetes, which is again, more than double the national average (4.0%). Less than half (47%) avoid foods high in fat and cholesterol—significantly below the national average of 67%.

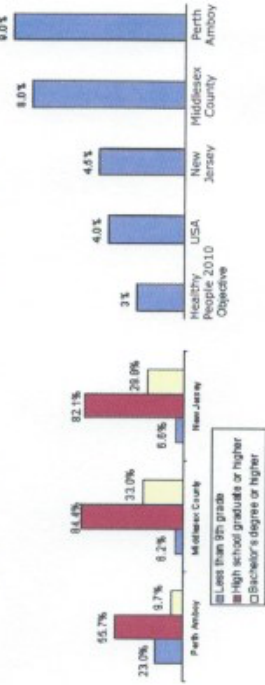
This combination of limited education and job skills, and poor health impede the ability of many Perth Amboy residents to fully participate in the city's revitalization plans. Under these circumstances young people can grow up with a bleak sense of the future. Moreover, the complex relationship between poverty, unstable and single-parent family structures and cultural factors, in particular the effects of family and individual acculturation of recent immigrants on healthy behaviors constitutes a significant barrier in the social environment preventing Perth Amboy residents from taking full advantage of opportunities that exist in the community for physical activity, including renovated parks, the waterfront esplanade, marina and restored beach, and walkable mixed use residential neighborhoods.

² Projections 2008: New Jersey Employment and Population in the 21st Century, Vol. I, NJ Department of Labor, Division of Labor Market and Demographic Research.

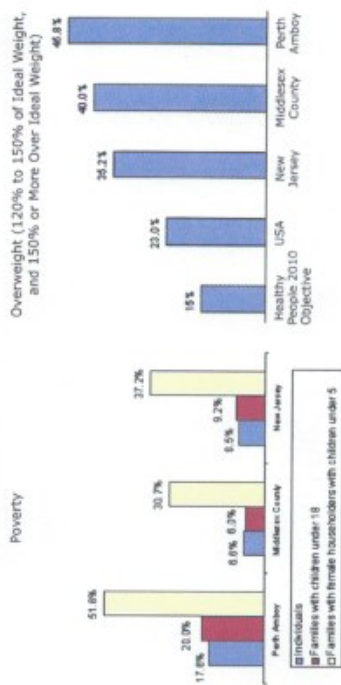
³ "Community Health Needs Assessment: Perth Amboy," 2001. Middlesex County Department of Public Health, New Brunswick, NJ.

Educational Achievement

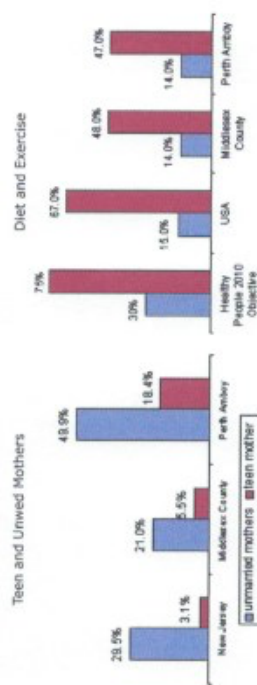
Have a Personal History of Diabetes



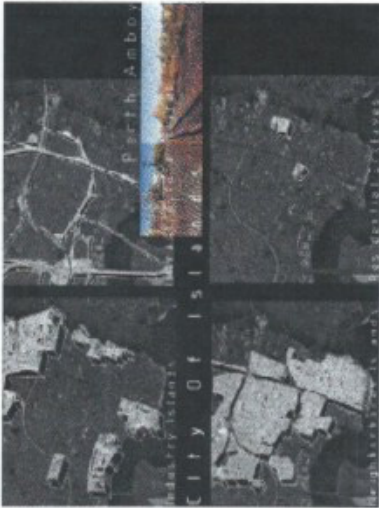
Poverty



Teen and Unwed Mothers



■ Exercise every day ■ Avoid foods high in fat and cholesterol



Students in the Columbia Urban Design Studio used digital imaging techniques and websites such as the one shown at right to present their work.

administration—coalesced into a team and “planned to plan.” At the kickoff site visit the students heard from representatives of the city and the district. City Business Administrator Don Perlee described a \$600 million mixed-use waterfront redevelopment project on 49 acres, and Mayor Vas’s concern that it might siphon activity away from the city’s main shopping street. He asked students to consider how neighborhood based development around schools could counteract this effect. Austin Gumbs, president of the Board of Education, explained that while he hoped the investment of Abbott funds would offset the danger of gentrification he wanted to encourage innovation. “Do not simply replace what is there,” he urged. “We want to build a showcase for a new kind of educational plan.”

Thanks to the Columbia urban design studio—which helped open up new ways of looking at the city and its landscape—and Robbins’ encouragement the Perth Amboy partnership decided to put together a proposal. It was at the final review of the urban design students work, that Robbins, who was a guest critic, “sold” the idea to Crowley and Perlee. Clausell and Gumbs eagerly agreed to sponsor a competition, and choose the new high school, which had to be built first so the rest of the district’s construction program could proceed. Clausell felt the competition would provide a way to demonstrate preferable alternatives to the state’s “one size fits all” educational program models, which reflected outdated ideas about teaching and learning, and did not address the particular needs of low income youth of color. This was so important he said, “Because what we build now will affect the next 50 – 100 years.”

The team came up with a two-phase project in which the OSP would be an active partner:

Phase One: The \$50,000 Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant would support a community-based planning process to develop the program and guidelines for the school design competition. The planning process would crystallize a vision for the new high school and how it fit into the city’s physical, social, cultural and economic landscape, thereby responding to the community’s needs and maximizing benefits for Perth Amboy as a whole.

Phase Two: The \$50,000 New Civic Works grant would support the national competition for the new high school, which would be articulated with the state school procurement system. The goal was to rethink what a high school for the 21st century should look like, while accepting the limitations imposed on Abbott funds.

Incubation and Proposal Development

In February the NEA invited the Perth Amboy partnership to submit a full proposal. The team enlisted Ralph Lerner, an architect with extensive experience with competitions, as a professional advisor. Lerner recommended a two-stage competition. Stage one would be open to all licensed architects. A jury would select four finalists to proceed to stage two, and receive an honorarium to complete their submissions. EDA, the state agency then responsible for financing and building all of the Abbott schools was a logical source for the additional \$100,000 needed to cover the cost of the honoraria since the competition would advance new facility project partly through the preliminary design phase, for which Abbott funds were allocated. EDA Executive Director Caren Franzini agreed to write a letter of support for the competition to the NEA, although couched in general terms. Based on DCA’s commitment to the project, the partners were willing to accept this level of uncertainty.

In September the NEA announced the award of the grant to Perth Amboy. Robbins made the announcement at the state sponsored Symposium on School Design in October 2001. At around the same time the DCA announced the award of the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant to Perth Amboy, as well as Memorandum of Understanding between the DCA, EDA and DOE to cooperate on the development of Abbott schools that would serve as a catalyst for community development. This spirit of interagency cooperation involving the collaboration of federal, state, and local agencies was essential for the successful launch of the Perth Amboy project.



Site Selection

While the state DOE does not have school site standards, elsewhere a 3,000 student high school could consume as much as 50 acres, including athletic fields and parking. In Perth Amboy, as in other urban school districts in New Jersey, the most densely populated state in the nation, the selection of sites for new schools is a particularly difficult challenge, given the dearth of vacant land suitable for development, and the many competing demands for that land. Moreover, the same characteristics that make Perth Amboy so ideally situated in the region and primed for revitalization—easy access to several major highways, maritime and rail transit, established industrial infrastructure—also make it hard to find sites that do not pose a threat to the health and/or safety of students and staff.

Three of the sites originally proposed for the new high school in the LRP are former industrial sites—brownfields. Only one, the location of the former National Lead factory, was compatible with the city's redevelopment plan. The DOE had approved this site, which was in a waterfront industrial zone, but in mid-March a preliminary feasibility study conducted by the EDA concluded that it would take too long and cost too much to remediate the environmental hazards there to the level required for use as a school. The district's business administrator sat down with the city's Director of Economic and Community Development, and the team's planning consultants, and compiled a new list of potential sites to evaluate. While this took place Clausell advised the team to keep moving forward with the visioning process. The momentum from public participation in planning the new high school from the "inside-out" would help build community support for a site, which was sure to be controversial given the limited options.

It is not only good planning practice for the City and Board of Education to work together to select the site for the new high school, it is mandated by the law authorizing the Abbott school construction program, the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act (EFCFA). The legislation (Section 4 subsection (g)) states:

"Each district shall submit the long-range facilities plan to the planning board of the municipality or municipalities in which the district is situate for the planning board's review ... of the extent to which the [LRFP] is informed by, and consistent with, at least the land use plan element and the housing element ... and such other elements of the municipal master plan as the planning board deems necessary to determine whether the respective sites for school facilities ... promote more effective and efficient coordination of school construction ... with the development efforts of the municipality."

Public Forum

Mayor Vas and Dr. Clausell hosted a public forum in 2002 to kick off the Community School Smart Grow Study and to invite people to volunteer to serve on the School Community Steering Committee. Members of the team, including planning consultants and Executive C explained the goals of the project, and described the which was designed to

- Involve a broad cross section of community members to articulate what people want to see in the high school
- Determine the resources and facilities needed to support the mission and goals of the high school for students well as to benefit the community as a whole.
- Learn from local experience and national experts which potential uses of the high school facility has the biggest impact on student learning
- Support a healthy and ongoing connection between the high school and this region's growing economy
- Tap into the enormous value that parents, community groups, businesses and service organizations can have for the educational experience of students.

The project director explained the specific issues that would be addressed through four subcommittees:

- Innovative Learning Environments
- Special Themed Academies
- Community Learning Centers
- Healthy Schools and Life-styles

Over one hundred people, including many teachers, volunteered to work on the sub-committees (although a smaller cadre conducted the bulk of the work). The subcommittees met weekly throughout the spring to review relevant literature and models, and discuss the unique assets, problems, opportunities and aspirations of Perth Amboy High School. Each group organized their work somewhat differently, but all made a report to the Board of Education at a public forum in late June.

There was significant overlap in the nature of the four sub-committees' recommendations, which reinforced the focus on health promotion. Collectively they shaped a vision for an environment that would be supportive of the development of at-risk adolescents. Notably, the Board of Education accepted the recommendation to reorganize the school as semi-autonomous, small themed academies. Such small schools that foster connectedness—a sense of belonging—could prevent health risk behaviors, according to one study.² Thus all four subcommittee reports are presented on the following pages, edited slightly for length.



² Kott, A. 2002. "Study: School Connectedness Protects Adolescent Health." *Advances: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*. Princeton, N.J. Issue 3, p.9. See www.abbotsdick.com.edu for a copy of the report by Dr. Robert Blum.

Community Steering Sub-Committee Reports

Small Themed Academies

Louis E. Gumbs, Jr. Chair
 Charlene Rutherford
 Nancy Kessler
 Irene Fic
 Austin Gumbs

courtyard and atrium (which allows natural light to filter in) where the space is provided for studying and socializing. The physical education and library space is also jointly used. After school programs allow for sport teams, clubs and organizations and volunteer opportunities.

PAHS students are motivated and eager to explore their chosen academy; these academies have been introduced to them in the 7th and 8th grade. Parents and students were given a resource guide, there have been orientations (opening the lines of communication) and our school resource room is open to all parents for further exploration of the academies. We have also benefited from the Junior High School goal oriented programs such as Gear Up. These programs and the introduction of the academies in the 7th and 8th grades have peaked curiosity and enthusiasm for entering PAHS.

Our staff is dedicated and energized. They are able to delve deeper in their specialty areas and are able to utilize more of their skills. The teaching staff is welcomed to share their ideas and is open to further training and staff development. They learn from their students as well. The staff is less stressed because they are working with students who share common interests and are eager to learn. The students are there by choice. The student-teacher relationship is based on good rapport.

PAHS benefits from high parent involvement. Our parents are supportive and very active in the management of the school. They are used as a resource financially, emotionally and physically. The parents serve as mentors, tutors and partners in programs.

We are proud that our community involvement is extensive. Our community not only serves as a classroom outside the physical school building but it engages residents of the community school programs (after school, co-op education,



Committee Chair Lou Gumbs

After an extensive amount of reading and discussion, we believe that smaller, themed academies, whether in freestanding buildings or as schools-within-a-school, would be a very positive approach to secondary education in Perth Amboy. We have developed the following vision:

In the 21st century Perth Amboy High School is a learning institution where students have the opportunity to explore career clusters in seven themes:

1. Performing and Fine Arts
2. Health Sciences
3. Environmental Sciences
4. Journalism/Communications
5. Culinary and Hospitality Arts
6. Business and Information Technology
7. Public Safety and Civic Affairs

Our Academies service 200 students each, accounting for 1,400 students of our 2,700-student population. The remaining 1,300 students enjoy a choice of special arts/general education, where they have the opportunity to explore the varying academies through choice of electives. This academic organization has drastically reduced the drop out rate by 82%.

Although our students are divided into academies, the interaction of all of the students is not limited. There are many opportunities to interact with one another. There are shared lunch periods in a common cafeteria environment. Students also take advantage of the indoor/outdoor

Community As Curriculum



Diagram of community resources to support teaching and learning aligned with proposed academy themes.

internships, as well as employment.) We have forged new partnerships with community business and institutions of higher learning including but not limited to: the Raritan Bay Medical Center, Middlesex County College, Perth Amboy Police Department, Neighboring Hotels, Local businesses, newspapers, theater groups and media centers. Middlesex County College has helped us institute several of our theme academies and is a vehicle for our students to pick up college credits through AP classes. Our school has been fortunate enough to draw on financial and professional backing to run our academies. We have an on-staff grant writer who secures our funding (present and future.)

The majority of our graduates go on to post secondary education. Some of the students

directly continue or enter career paths. They give back to the community as well as the school with their knowledge. We have begun the task of tracking our students through data collection and alumni services. Our students have been noted to say that their high school experience has given them a clearer insight to what their short and long term goals are. They are able to make more informed choices based on their chosen academy. We are excited and proud that we are helping produce independent and committed adults.

It is also the recommendation of this committee the appropriate committee, board or person apply for the available grant for Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) the final deadline for this grant is February 2003.

Community Steering Committee Reports

Community Learning Center

Ana Cruz, Chair
Johanna Cruz
Lynn K. Valenty
Kristy C. Perez
Senovia Robles Cruz
Sylvia Leon
Gidget Lopez
Vivian Argemil
Estelle David



Committee Chair Ana Cruz

The concept of building modern schools to serve as centers of community comes as an answer to the challenges of the 21st century and the need to better utilize resources and space in growing communities. Research indicates that the school of the future integrates learning communities to accommodate the needs of all community stakeholders. A successful school has a strong sense of community identity and operates in partnership and collaboration with private, public and civic groups.

Today's educational facilities should be designed to serve families and community members after the end of the school day and to support what happens in the classrooms during school hours through partnerships with community businesses, non-profit agencies, cultural and social organizations, community volunteers, colleges and universities, social service agencies, local hospitals and government agencies among others. This new facility can serve as a full-time integrated learning center, accessible day and night, all year round, with ample space where learning occurs "after hours" and on weekends; and where partnerships are encouraged.

The Community Learning Centers subcommittee conducted three forums with parents, students, educators, and citizens with the purpose of engaging them in planning and designing Perth Amboy High School as a center of our community. As a result of these meetings and many conversations with community members and key stakeholders, sixteen ideas or concepts were identified and recommended as part of what would be needed to support a "community center" learning environment for the new Perth Amboy High School.

A sample of one hundred and fifty-two residents, ages 16-65, parents, staff, students, and grandparents, took part in a survey designed to identify priorities in the construction of the new facility. In addition a group of parents, staff and students from the Saturday Morning Family School, under the direction of Ms. Senovia Cruz, joined our subcommittee and prepared a power point presentation entitled "Perth Amboy High School of the Future"—community, parents, teachers and students working together.

The following is a list of the subcommittee recommendations in priority order:

1. **After school academic and enrichment learning centers** that support activities for students of all ages as well as adult education classes and training for community members and staff;
2. **A combined school and public library** that improves library services to the community at large;
3. **A parent center-** with ample space to incorporate a parenting resource area- and to invite parents to be more involved in the school day to day activities;
4. **A day care center** that operates during the day for children of students and staff and also during the evening for families attending evening school activities and that provides early childhood learning activities;
5. **A health care center for students and families**—offering after school evening and Saturday family health services;
6. **A center for careers, employments skills and counseling,** connecting the classroom, the families, the community and the workplace environment— modeling the One-Stop concept of the Workforce Investment Act;
7. **Indoor and outdoor sports facilities;**
8. **A media center** that includes a TV station, a radio station and a recording studio;
9. **A quiet area** for relaxation and family gatherings, a plaza center, a "town green" area, **a central place for parental and family engagement;**
10. **A college satellite site-** to offer college courses for community members and staff in collaboration with area colleges;
11. **An arts center** with a dance studio that addresses the diverse social and cultural characteristics of families in our community;
12. **A community museum** that reflects the cultural heritage of our city- a place for students, staff and community members to display their talents, to learn about the rich history and culture of Perth Amboy and to share our diversity;
13. **An auditorium** with facilities that support a "Community Theater;"
14. **A social activities center;**
15. **An architectural design and landscape that reflects the diversity of our community;**
16. **Adequate parking.**

The most successful schools of the future will be integrated learning communities, which accommodate the needs of all of the community's stakeholders.

Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizens Guide to Planning and Design
US Dept. of Education, 2000.

Site Evaluation

Over the summer the planning team also completed their evaluation of the nine new alternative sites (see illustration page 29). They rated each site in terms of 12 criteria (safety, location, environment, soils, topography, size and shape, accessibility, utilities, cost, availability, and public acceptance). This analysis identified three acceptable sites from which the final choice could be made: the Delaney Homes public housing complex, the vacant Schott furniture factory, and the former site of a Chevron petrochemical plant. The site evaluation report, submitted to the Board of Education in August, recommended the 1.5-acre Delaney Homes complex, which while not ideal, was the best available alternative.

Delaney Homes



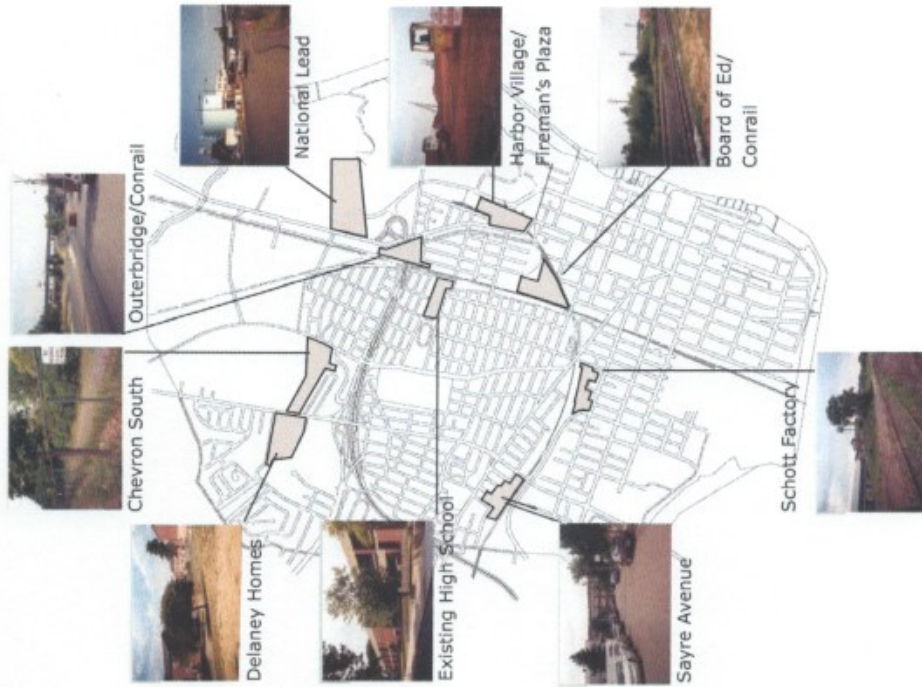
- Advantages of Delaney Homes site**
- No apparent safety hazards or pollution;
 - Favorable orientation to wind and sun;
 - Can serve as a new gateway to the city and stimulate economic development of the northwest quadrant of the city;
 - Size and shape suitable for the program, with additional athletic and recreational areas in adjacent city parks (including a fishing pond);
 - Adjacent open space provides potential for expansion to accommodate future growth of enrollment;
 - Public transportation is available;
 - Easy vehicular access;
 - No natural barriers; and
 - No loss of property tax income, and owner plans on demolishing the 252 existing homes and relocate the tenants.

Limitations of Delaney Homes site

- Adjacent to major roadway; pedestrian routes to school must cross busy intersections;
- The location in the northwestern quadrant will require bussing of students from the southern part of the city, for the first time in this 4 mile square district;
- The location is remote from the majority of community partners and resources.
- Housing Authority has its own plan for redevelopment of the site.

Given these limitations, the consultants recommended that the District plan for safe pedestrian and bicycle routes to school; and give serious consideration to the use of multi-story construction; underground or decked parking; structures; rooftop open space; and incorporation of supplemental interior space dedicated to fitness activities.

Primary Alternative Site Inventory Location Map



Community School Collaborative for Health

Fortuitously, just as we were finalizing the building program, two funding opportunities arose that provided an impetus to reorganize the Healthy School and Lifestyles Committee, as a more permanent coalition: 1) an RFP to form **community partnerships to increase physical activity through community design, public policies and communications strategies**, issued by the RWJF sponsored Active Living By Design Program, for which proposals were due in January 2003; and 2) an RFP to form **community partnerships for healthy adolescents** issued by the state Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS), which was due February 2003. The latter had come to the attention of Sandy Mansonet, a member of the Healthy School and Lifestyles Committee who is the director of the School Based Youth Services (SBYS) program housed at the high school.

Mansonet agreed to provide leadership of the ongoing work of the committee, in which SBYS would become a principle partner of the Community School Coalition. This is an ideal match—one goal of the project was to ensure the sustainability of the community school partnership in general, and the Healthy School and Lifestyles committee in particular by building on existing initiatives such as SBYS. The NJ Department of Human Services (DHS) initiated the SBYS program in 1987, to integrate a range of services for adolescents in one location at or near schools. The Jewish Renaissance Foundation (JRF), a nonprofit social service agency, runs the SBYS program at PAHS, in collaboration with the City of Perth Amboy Recreation Department; the Jewish Renaissance Medical Center; the Board of Education; the Perth Amboy Housing Authority; Planned Parenthood of Central NJ; and UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School AIDS Program. In the past four years the program has thrived under Mansonet's leadership, serving over 2,000 students.

The City of Perth Amboy served as the lead agency in the Active Living By Design program proposal (which included a team of planners from Rutgers University). While this proposal was unsuccessful, the work put into developing it was worthwhile. It helped sharpen the focus of the Healthy School and Lifestyle committee's action plan—identifying programs that could be implemented now, and a strategy for undertaking longer term initiatives—and laid the groundwork for a successful submission to the DHSS.

The JRF/SBYS program serves as the lead agency in the proposal submitted to DHSS, which focuses primarily on high school students who range between the ages of 14-17—a group comprising almost 16% of Perth Amboy's total population. The principal partners in this Community School Collaborative for Adolescent Health are the JRF and its Medical Center, the Perth Amboy Recreation Department, Perth Amboy Board of Education, Raritan Bay Mental Health Center, Perth Amboy Housing Authority, and student representatives of Perth Amboy High School. As required by the RFP the proposal identified two inter-related goals:

- **Unhealthy Dietary Patterns and Physical Inactivity:**

To assist young people and their families develop new lifestyles by creating supportive environments where healthy eating and physical activities can be promoted

- **Injury and Violence:**

To implement strategies that both reduce risk factors and increase protective factors leading to less violent behavior and more positive behavior.

DHSS selected the Perth Amboy Community School Collaborative for Adolescent Health as one of only 13 sites to receive funding. This three-year grant provides operating funds which enabled the hiring of a full time coordinator, Malcolm Watts, who came on board in September 2003, and the formation of a student advisory board, just as the second stage of the high school design competition was getting into full swing.



Sandy Mansonet, Director of the School Based Youth Services program at PAHS.

Site Visit and Public Forum

The community had chance to meet the four finalists at a public forum in September. The evening forum was the first chance the architects had to explain their vision for the school and answer questions, following a full day spent listening to NJSCC staff, district leaders, the Executive Committee, the four Community Steering Committees, faculty, staff, students—represented by the newly formed Community School Collaborative for Adolescent Health student advisory group.

The day had a celebratory feel that energized all involved, as various people proudly shared their contribution to the vision for the new school. The presentations educated both the architects as well as the many personnel who were either new to their positions or new to the district — including new Superintendent Jack Rodecker (previously the district Business Administrator), the new Business Administrator and new Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, new high school principal Rozalia Czaban, and the faculty Czaban brought with her to the high school from the middle school where she had been the principal.

To compete in stage two, the finalists had to become pre-qualified by the New Jersey School Construction Corporation (NJSCC). The first order of business therefore at the site visit was an orientation to the pre-qualification process by Pete McGlinchy, and other NJSCC staff. McGlinchy, NJSCC liaison to the competition, expedited the pre-qualification process and worked hard at every step along the way to ensure the success of the competition, which had to be articulated with strict state school procurement procedures.

Unfortunately, in early October, Gabriel Feld withdrew due to issues related to pre-qualification. Luckily the first runner up, Eisenman Architects, of New York, accepted the invitation to belatedly enter the competition. This meant we had to delay the final jury, and put the three finalists proposals, submitted in late October, into storage while Eisenman began the stage two process, including the site visit.

The occasion of Peter Eisenman's site visit in November provided an opportunity to continue the collective conversation about the new vision for the high school, including opportunities to encourage routine physical activity through the design of the building and grounds.



Forum to introduce the finalists to the public. Top from left: Board of Education member David Benolva; Board President Austin Gumbs; Competition Advisor Ralph Lerner; Superintendent of Schools John Rodecker; Thom Mayne of Morphosis. Bottom from left: John Ronan, Gabriel Feld, and PAHS principal Rozalia Czaban.



At the site visit architects mainly listened. Top Right: Student body president and vice president (and advisors to the Collaborative for Healthy Adolescents). Above: District Supervisor of Health and Physical Education Alice Molar (at right). Right: PAHS director of health and physical education Greg Fikarra. Below: Food Services Manager Mary Ann Teslukas (far right). Finalists shown include Peter Eisenman (above); Heidi Blau of Fox & Fowle, Gabriel Feld, and Sualthir Jambhekar of Morphosis, Blau, and John Ronan.





Public Exhibition

At long last, with the submission of Eisenman's proposal in early February, we could finally take the other three out of storage. Everyone was excited about opening the elaborate packages —each included a set of ten large panels and at least one model, identified only by number. For months, we had been preparing to set up an exhibit of the four proposals in the heavily trafficked front hall of PAHS. The exhibit opened with a press conference and public viewing, and remained open throughout the month, with special hours for the public at night and on weekends.

Through articles in the school district newsletter, local papers and features on PATV, we invited the public to study the proposals and comment (while trying not to give the impression the public was voting for the winner). And comment they did. In addition to spurring lively conversations and debate — and much media attention — we received 220 comment forms.

Features intended to encourage physical activity attracted a lot of attention, expressed both verbally and in the written comments. Notably, in citing their preference for one proposal many people referred to it's six story physical fitness "tower", while those who favored another proposal referred to its indoor track. On the other hand, public opinion was not in favor of forcing students to walk outside by separating the academics and shared facilities in separate buildings. Several people expressed concern about the safety of a green roof which students might be tempted to jump off. These comments were conveyed to the jury, who took them to heart.

Top: Austin Gumbs and John Rodecker prepare to be filmed by Richard Shuldis, PAHS video teacher, for a show to be broadcast on PATV reminding the public to visit the display of the finalists proposals at PAHS; Upper middle: Shuldis observes while a student interviews Rodecker for PATV; Lower middle: The Walking to Better Health tracking map hung in school's lobby throughout the exhibit, shown below. Right: Middle school students visit the exhibit.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY PATV



The Final Jury and Public Forum

The day of the final jury was hectic, as the jurors and finalists once more traveled from across the country to meet at PAHS. Throughout the day the finalists and their teams assembled to present their schemes, and answer tough questions about cost, concept, construction and classroom configuration, issues large and small. Although not open to the public, PAHV recorded the proceedings (except for the jury's deliberations in order to preserve the integrity of the process.) The choice was not an easy one to make, and the public's comments—which were overwhelmingly in favor of John Roman's scheme—only complicated the matter. Happily the jury concurred with public opinion in this case. In their view, the winning feature of Roman's proposal was its overall clarity and originality. But the jury also unanimously made a point of recognizing Peter Eisenman's proposal with second prize. Exhausted and excited with their stunning selection, the jurors then crossed town in the wet snow to the Raritan Bay Yacht Club, where Superintendent Rodecker made the announcement of Roman's upset victory over his world-renowned competitors to the packed crowd that had gathered. Members of the community immediately embraced the young architect as one of their own, mindful that his design for the new PAHS will propel his career as much as it will energize the city's future.

The celebration continued in April when the Architectural League of New York hosted a month long exhibition of the four finalists proposals at the Urban Center on Madison Avenue. On a stormy early spring evening people from Perth Amboy packed the elegant exhibition hall—exhilarated to find their school the center of attention in a city at the center of the design. They savored the moment knowing that the competition had reached its finale, a process of change it had sparked was only beginning.



L to r: David Benyola, Austin Gumbs, Rozella Czaban, John Roman, Mayor Väs, Superintendent John Rodecker, Kenneth Gonzalez, and Joel Pabon



Lessons

In addition to achieving its primary goal—to engage significant public input in comprehensive planning for the school to address a broad range of community needs; and to encourage innovative designs (rather than conform to a cookie cutter model) without adding to the time or cost involved in school procurement—the Perth Amboy High School design competition process succeeded in raising awareness about opportunities to incorporate physical activity into daily routines through the site plan, facility design, and programming of the new high school. To maintain momentum and sustain action, the Healthy School and Lifestyle planning committee reorganized as the more permanent Community School Collaborative for Healthy Adolescents. While this project was complex, evolved from an existing initiative, and embedded in a particular set of issues, the following insights are offered to help guide others who might want to adapt this model to promote health through community school design elsewhere.

Strategic public investment encourages innovation

Just as strategic investment by federal and state agencies brought the issues of community engagement and design quality to the fore in this school facility project, RWJF's investment focused attention on the health issues of physical inactivity and obesity. The prestige associated with both the NEA and RWJF grants helped give the community a voice it otherwise would not have had in the Abbott school procurement process—and also helped give state agencies permission to do things in new ways, as long as their program goals were met. Notably, the state DOE approved an innovative program model with features designed to link physical activity promotion with strategies to improve academic performance and support educational reform. As a "special case" this project benefited from a high level of cooperation between state agencies as well as between local authorities accustomed to a high degree of autonomy.

State and local partnership

Another reason this project enjoyed a high level of inter-agency cooperation is because of its origins as partnership between the city, school district, and the former Office of State Planning (OSP), in the context of a multi-agency, statewide Communities of Learning campaign to promote citizen participation in planning and design of schools as centers of community. Even after the demise of the OSP and the community school campaign, this project benefited from its connections to wide ranging networks of support—the vestiges of the "Community of Learners." Ideally replication of the "Perth Amboy model" would form part of a larger project, to implement such a statewide (or large city-wide) program, operating at many levels of government and at the grass roots to encourage collaborative local experimentation with "activity friendly," community school designs and programs.

Catalytic Leadership

Strong leadership and a culture of cooperation in Perth Amboy are important factors for the successful replication of this model elsewhere. It is not enough to have one, without the other. This is not to say there were no tensions among the various players. Sometimes the tension was healthy, other times counter-productive. But the unwavering commitment of city and school leaders to the project, and the community's capacity for collaboration, kept the team moving forward and focused on solving the problems that arose along the way.

Comprehensive Approach: Build a broad constituency

The Community School Steering Committee allowed us to engage the public in the "inside-out" planning process, despite controversies surrounding site selection. The prospect of the competition imposed a timeline which helped keep the volunteer subcommittees focused and effective. With four subcommittees we were able to cast a wide net and build a broad constituency. Within this overarching framework it was relatively easy to recruit one group interested in the topic of a Healthy School and Lifestyles. But the difficulty of such a holistic approach is getting people to stay focused on the big picture, rather than as a specialist in their own field.

Layered programming process: idealistic realism

A design competition is only as good as its program. Once you get political approval for the program, the system is geared to build what has been approved. The layered participatory planning process that guided the development of the Perth Amboy High School program not only generated a complex, richly conceived program, but also secured the necessary state and local political support for an innovative model.

Building a sustainable collaborative: A fluid process

One goal of the planning process was to ensure the sustainability of the community-school partnership by building on existing initiatives such as the SBYS, and incorporating those initiatives as part of plan for the design and programming of the new school. The Community School Collaborative for Healthy Adolescents is an ideal mechanism to maintain the momentum achieved during the planning process and design competition. But building a collaboration is a fluid process, which can go in different directions as each partner assumes a role. To take the Collaborative to the next level will require expanding beyond the high school, and engaging community organizations in a more active role. Whether or not the Collaborative can develop this additional organizational capacity will depend on the continued availability of strategic resources: time, money and expertise.