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Recycling Surplus Schools



Putting old buildings to use once again

Ryan Gever

Following the flight from the cities in the late 20th century, many urban school districts consolidated or closed some of their school inventory. These excess, vacant school buildings are often referred to as surplus properties, facilities, or schools. Most often, surplus schools are located in low-income communities where the schoolhouse was one of few community amenities in an otherwise residential neighborhood.

It is common that the affected building is the largest physical

Required Reading

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asset and community space in its neighborhood and school closures and consolidations are understandably very contentious. The resulting efficiency of school consolidation is, however, often determined to be the best option for providing a quality education to community members.

But in those scenarios that result in surplus schools, little thought is given to the future of these properties after they have shut their doors as district school buildings. This is a fairly recent phenomenon, and few precedents exist for determining the best use for these properties and how to repurpose them.

However, there is a lot to learn from some of the first U.S. cities that have begun to take the necessary steps to reuse surplus properties. Reflecting on the recent experiences of affected cities such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Chicago, the following is a list of tips and practices to facilitate the process of putting surplus school buildings to good use once again.

Figure out what is wrong with the building

It is likely that enrollment was not the only reason the building is no longer a school. A key factor in the decision to close a school is often the physical condition of the building. Surplus buildings often suffer from lack of investment, deferred maintenance, vandalism, theft, and other unwanted activities.

Further, if a surplus building sits vacant, any pre-existing physical issues are likely to worsen while new ones arise. In D.C., for example, one surplus building sat unknowingly with a flooded basement for months while another was victim to arson. In addition, many urban school buildings have been plagued with other physical issues associated with their initial construction. Several D.C. schools built in the 1960s and 1970s have post-tensioned slabs, since they were designed to be community shelters, while others sit on poor soils, since they were often built on former city dumps. While these qualities are all surmountable, they must be uncovered as early as possible to be appropriately addressed.

Identify who has the authority to repurpose the building

As urban school districts are commonly very large, it is not

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always clear who has the authority to decide the future of a vacated public building, but this entity must be identified. In Chicago, for example, the Illinois School Code sets a process by which the school district may sell real estate. However, depending on the title holder of the specific property, additional approvals must be given by the Chicago city government.

Meanwhile, in D.C. over the last four years, reuse of surplus properties has required the participation and approval of the office of the deputy mayor for education, the department of general services (which acts as the city's landlord), D.C. Public Schools, and the National Park Service at times. Great attention should be given to this step of the process, especially if a district has not repurposed many surplus schools before and a formal process has not yet been established.

Determine the site control mechanism to be used

Should a surplus property be sold or leased? There are many factors to consider here. Different districts have decided to pursue different site control mechanisms. Selling the property results in loss of the land and improvements that could have otherwise been regained at the end of a lease. If leased, there are fewer lenders willing to finance a leasehold project, and the lease term needs to be long enough to amortize the debt.

Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Chicago have all pursued sales and leases. In D.C., for instance, recent surplus properties have been leased to maintain control of the land and to keep capital improvements and lease payments going into public assets. However, Philadelphia's most recent school closings resulted in the sale of several surplus buildings to developers and local universities in order to receive the immediate cash benefit.

Also worth considering is the need to have appropriate personnel and systems in place to administer the terms of the lease. A sale, in comparison, does not require any ongoing operations.

This surplus trend is still developing in the U.S. It is important that any stakeholder involved in the repurposing of a surplus property be empowered as much as possible to take on these often daunting—yet extremely

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rewarding—processes. The decision to surplus a school is never an easy one. No one way of repurposing these schools has arisen as the premier way to do. However, districts that have gone through this process all agree on one thing: An occupied and repurposed surplus school is always better than a vacant one.

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