Forum: School Siting and School Site Design for a Healthy Community

Executive Summary

August 2012

HEART & STROKE FOUNDATION

Hamilton

METROLINX

Acknowledgements

Forum Planning Committee

City Of Hamilton:
Elizabeth Conti, Sharon Mackinnon, Jacqui Candlish, Peter Topalovic, Kelly Scott

Metrolinx:
Jennifer Lay

Heart and Stroke Foundation:
Andrea MacLean

Giffin-Koerth:
Russell Brownlee

Forum Contributors

Presenters:
Dr. Ninh Tran
Mr. Russell Brownlee (and facilitator)

Discussion Panel:
Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board
Hamilton Wentworth District School Board
City of Hamilton Planning & Economic Development Department
City of Hamilton Public Works Department

Discussion Circle:
York Catholic District School Board
Region of Halton
Grguric Architects

Contact for more information:

Kelly Scott, Chronic Disease Prevention
Healthy Living Division
City of Hamilton Public Health Services
kelly.scott@hamilton.ca

Partners & Funders:

"Innovative thinking occurring beyond isolated silos is needed to address this complex issue that has the potential for long term effects on communities."

Dr. Ninh Tran, Associate Medical Officer of Health
City Of Hamilton

Executive Summary

Context of School Siting and School Site Design for a Healthy Community

Schools are recognized as being central to the growth and development of children through their role in delivering education and facilitating social interaction. Perhaps less recognized but equally important is the function of school sites as community hubs, which exert many influences on the surrounding neighbourhood[1] (see Figure 1).

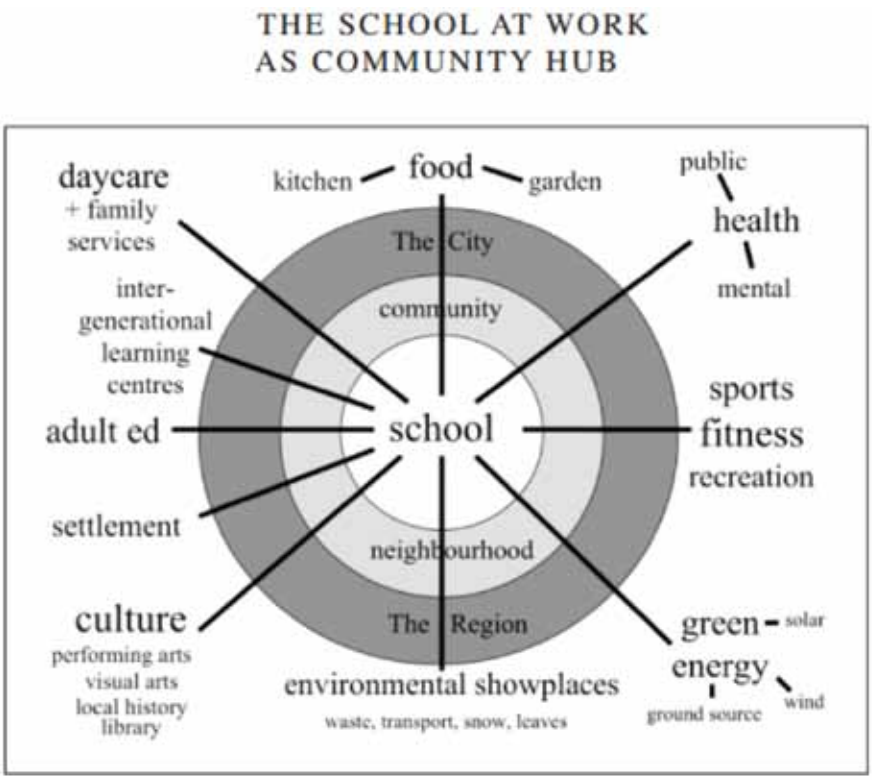

Figure 1: The School as Community Hub by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives[1]

Transportation to and from schools has been raised as an issue of growing importance due to steady declines in walking and increases in automobile use which have health, environmental, economic and social impacts. The school transportation choices made by individuals and groups are influenced by school location (i.e., siting) and the physical features of school grounds (i.e., site design), among other factors. Hosting forums for dialogue between multiple stakeholders is a key first step to better understanding and addressing this complex issue, and to fostering collaboration with the common goal of ensuring that schools maximize their positive impact as educational facilities and as sustainable community hubs.

KEY FACTS

In Canada, measured data shows that only 7% of children and youth 5-17 years old and 15% of adults accumulate the recommended amount of physical activity.[16,17]

- Home to school distance has been found to be the strongest predictor of active and sustainable school travel (ASST).[24-31]
- Research has established important linkages between the built environment, health, and physical activity.[1]
- Nearly a quarter of elementary students living within 1 km are regularly driven to school.[34]

Forum Overview

On May 17, 2012, a full-day forum about "School Siting and School Site Design for a Healthy Community" was hosted by the forum organizers: the City of Hamilton Public Health Services, Metrolinx, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation. The forum brought together representatives from across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), including government, not-for-profit and private sectors. Together these stakeholders took the first step toward answering the overarching question:

To foster a healthier community, how can school siting and school site design better support people to use active and sustainable school travel modes?

The forum built on the history and momentum of active and sustainable school travel initiatives within the GTHA, the recognized links between the built environment and health, and the need for greater collaboration from multiple stakeholders in this issue. Shaped by this context, the forum objectives to answer the overarching question included the following

- Build on previous momentum
- Develop a common understanding
- Explore existing policies and gaps
- Build relationships

Forum Sessions

The forum elements included keynote presentations, a discussion panel with Hamilton school board and municipal professionals, a GTHA discussion circle, and a SWOT analysis activity.

Forum Trends and Recommended Next Steps

Key themes and ideas about school siting and school site design for a healthy community emerged from collaborative forum activities and discussions between municipal, school board, provincial, and non-government stakeholders at the forum. Overall, stakeholders recognized the complexity of the topic at hand and emphasized the following actions (grouped by objective):

☑ **Build on momentum of active and sustainable transportation**

ACTIONS:

- Stakeholders to come together to endorse a vision of healthy living based upon active and sustainable transportation, and land-use policy and planning principles (e.g., see the Waterloo Region District School Board's Active Transportation Charter — www.wrdsb.ca/planning/active-and-safe-routes-school/active-transportation-charter)
- Share the lessons from this report with parent associations and further connect with them to explore potential roles in parent education, awareness, and involvement in advocacy

☑ **Develop a common understanding of school siting and school site design**

ACTIONS:

- Stakeholder groups to gather more often to establish roles, shared goals and targets, and further develop actions (e.g., further engagement of developers)
- Stakeholders to ensure that their internal departments are engaged and understand linkages

☑ **Explore existing policies and guidelines, and identify gaps**

ACTIONS:

- Review policies that influence school siting and school site design with a health impact lens (e.g., by-laws; Acts; revenue generation and allocation models; liability; planning requirements)
- Increase communication and awareness about the existing supports for active transportation provided by the municipality and school boards
- Explore how/if funds from the provincial ministry level can be allocated differently to support non-motorized modes of school transportation

☑ **Build relationships and partnerships towards a shared vision for action**

ACTIONS:

- Continue to involve multiple stakeholders including provincial ministries, architects, researchers, school boards, NGOs, municipality; break down silos; and work to normalize the incorporation of active and sustainable transportation into plans, policy, and legislation (see Figure 2)
- Formalize involvement in stages of school and community planning where stakeholders can have impact
- Enhance discussions between school boards, municipalities and the Ministry of Education on the topic of school consolidation to include broader health, economic, and environmental impacts (e.g., through Accommodation Review Committee process)
- Share the lessons from this report with parent associations and further connect with them to explore potential roles in parent education, awareness, and involvement in advocacy

A healthy community encourages cross-sector collaboration, and public participation in decision making for policies, programs, and services at multiple levels of influence that increase physical activity opportunities where we live, learn, work and play.[2]

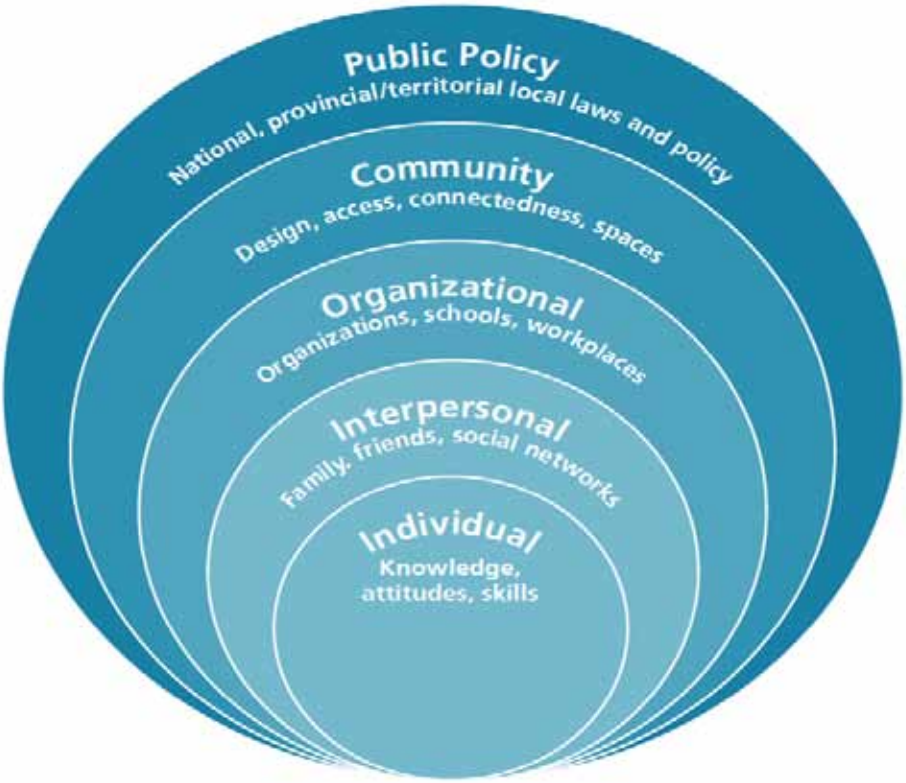

Figure 2: A Social Ecological Model for a Healthy Community[2]

Conclusion

An in-depth discussion about the action items identified by forum participants was beyond the scope of the forum; however, this will be a focus for subsequent work of the forum organizers in collaboration with stakeholders.