



The Economic Benefits of Safe School Siting



School districts are struggling with budget concerns as student enrollments reach an all time high. However, between the costs for hiring contractors for site inspection, the site cleanup, and the relocation of schools, building on contaminated sites is no longer an advantage, but a fiscal nightmare.

Today there exist few state and no federal laws preventing the building of schools on or near sources of pollution. The average US public school is almost 50 years old. As of 2005, 40% of America's schools report needing \$36 billion to repair or replace building features. At the same time, schools show record enrollments and school districts are struggling with budget concerns

When constructing and renovating schools, thousands of school boards choose to build their schools on contaminated property in an attempt to save money. Opportunities present themselves that seem to provide an economic advantage, such as the donation of contaminated land, and most certainly discounted prices for hazardous property. However, many schools across the nation who have chosen

such inexpensive sites experience a much different and economically dissatisfying results.

Are these schools safe and healthy places for children to grow, play, and learn? Children are known to be more vulnerable than adults to the effects of pollution. Exposure to environmental pollutants during important times of physiological development can lead to long-lasting health problems, dysfunction, and disease.

Below are examples of situations where schools across the nation have made such efforts to save money during the school siting process. In the end, the inspection, cleanup, and relocation costs are unexpectedly high and the profit they hoped for is actually fiscally disadvantageous.



Carson Gore Academy

Los Angeles, California

The Carson-Gore Academy of Environmental Sciences was built on top of more than a dozen storage tanks containing industrial toxins. Just a few weeks before the 2010 school year, the school district ordered a cleanup of the area- postponing its opening to avoid any potential health risks. ⁱ

Building Price: \$75.5 Million

Cleanup: \$4 Million ⁱⁱ

Total Cost: \$79.5 Million

River Valley Schools

Marion, Ohio

The River Valley High School and two elementary schools were constructed on a World War II-era Army depot contaminated with dangerous levels of highly hazardous chemicals. Research conducted in the late 20th century showed over 100 cases of leukemia from attendees of these schools. In 2000, it was decided that the school be relocated and the site cleaned up. ⁱⁱⁱ

Relocation: \$43.5 Million

Clean Up: \$30 Million

Total Cost: \$73.5 Million

Grandview Hills Elementary School

Austin, Texas

A former Sasol North America, Inc. building used for chemical research, testing, and development work was renovated to be used as the Grandview Hills Elementary School. Parents were not pleased with the original environmental testing after mold was found in the building preceding its opening in 2007. Although parent's demanded more testing, their concerns were not addressed and the school was opened as planned. ^{iv}

Property: \$14.5 Million

Renovations: N/A*

Clean Up: \$4 Million

Numerous Inspections: N/A*

Total Cost: \$18.5 Million+

Keith Middle School

New Bedford, Massachusetts

The Parker Street Waste Site was chosen as the location for three school properties. The New Bedford High School and the McCoy Fields were opened despite the findings of high levels of toxic chemicals on the site. Years later, in 2006, the EPA demanded a cleanup of the public and private areas surrounding the school property before Keith Middle School could be finished. ^v

Cleanup: \$33.6 Million

New School: \$70 Million

Total Cost: \$103.6 Million

Marsh Fork Elementary School

Raleigh County, West Virginia

Marsh Fork Elementary School was constructed downhill from the nearby Massey Energy Coal Mine, 300 feet from a Coal Silo. After high level dust emission and asbestos were found in the school, parents demanded funds for relocation of school.^{vi}

Relocation: \$7.5 Million
Cleanup Effort: \$1 Million
 Total Cost: \$8.5 Million

Moton Elementary School

New Orleans, Louisiana

In 1987, this school building was completed on the former Agriculture Street Landfill, the city's waste dump for over 50 years. After three years of an increase in staff and student body health problems, the school board shut the school down for cleanup.

Building/Property Price: N/A*
Clean Up: \$20 Million
 Total Cost: \$20 Million+

Environmentally Linked Diseases and Economics

As students and staff spend hours a week in buildings that are built upon contaminated sites, these schools are seeing an increase in health issues, and therefore, absences. Schools lose funding annually not only for staff absences (salary related), but for student absences (in government grants, etc.). Nationally, just for absences related to asthma alone, there is a financial burden of \$16.1 Billion.^{vii}

Belmont Learning Complex

Los Angeles, California

The Belmont Learning Complex was built on top of a former oil field full of explosive and toxic gases and other contaminants. The full environmental assessment was not completed until after \$123 Million was already put into the project. The site was then abandoned due to the health and safety concerns. A new school was built in 2008 after a thorough cleanup.^{viii}

Initial Structure: \$123 Million
 Clean Up and Safety Measures: \$90 Million
Completed School Building: \$87 Million
 Total Cost: \$310 Million

The economic advantage that school boards hope for with the purchase of a contaminated site is rarely as beneficial as designed. School districts are struggling with budget concerns as student enrollments reach an all time high. However, between the costs for hiring contractors for site inspection, the site cleanup, and the relocation of schools, building on contaminated sites is no longer an advantage, but a fiscal nightmare. Schools

like Belmont have spent up to \$310 Million dollars correcting their poor decision to construct a school on toxic land. The School Siting Guidelines released by the EPA in October 2011 are voluntary and can be used as a model to enact stronger policies. Although voluntary, a federal model lends credibility that locating a school on or near sources of pollution is not a good idea, nor does it save money in the long run.

References:

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- ^{iv} Hover, Chelsea (2007) “TCEQ OKs Leander School Site,” *News8Austin*.
- ^v Evans, Becky W., “Dreams Dashed on Contaminated Land,” *South Coast Today*,
- ^{vi} Washington Examiner (2009) “Official WVA School Replacement Not a Given.” *Washington Examiner*. [www.washingtonexaminer.com]
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- ^{viii} Larrubia, Evelyn and Howard Blume (2007) “Belmont Building Costs Continue to Soar,” *Los Angeles Times*. [<http://articles.latimes.com>]

* N/A: Not available