



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Downtown Schools & CED

By CED Program Interns & Students

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A recent post on the CED blog discussed the relationships that make up a downtown public school. The Downtown School in Winston-Salem, NC demonstrates a school as an opportunity to add a level of vibrancy to the downtown area by mutually benefitting the students, parents, and myriad other organizations (business partners, local small businesses, etc.) that are stakeholders in a downtown school. Communities may have more questions about what it could look like to place schools and educational needs at the center of downtown community and economic development. This post gives a rundown of some resources that could be useful in that exploration.

One major Southern city that has explored downtown schools in recent years is Nashville, TN. In 2011, the Nashville Civic Design Center produced its findings regarding new schools in downtown Nashville. It touches on many of the opportunities that are presented by Winston-Salem's downtown school — schools potentially attracting families to live in downtown, education as an element of urban sustainability, and schools playing into building a safer and healthier community. The report is certainly and reasonably Nashville-centric, but also presents a compelling examination of schools as assets for a downtown area.

In another, yet more NC-centric, major Southern city, the local news covered the development of a new school that sounds a lot like The Downtown School. In June, the Charlotte Observer published a story that discussed the new Charlotte Lab School, a charter elementary school that is attracting families as an “anchor in the redevelopment of First Ward.”

For those interested in additional resources regarding the research behind the role of schools in communities, The University of California at Berkeley has a center for that. The Center for Cities and Schools has done some fascinating research. Two of the most relevant studies for readers of this blog are the ones that discuss the joint use of school facilities and the opportunity in aligning high-quality education with planning and development goals. Those two publications affirm a lesson that can be gained from The Downtown School – maximizing the value of a downtown school to a community requires careful and intentional planning. Schools can be physical assets that serve as public spaces that house multiple community-oriented uses. Towns and cities can serve as expanded classrooms for students and families. However, accomplishing those aims requires very careful planning.

Thriving communities are often seen as places where a variety of people can live, work, and play. Schools, whether K-12 or higher education institutions, may be able to add a new level of vibrancy to that list—“learn.” The stories and research in this post may be useful to communities that are considering pursuing that element of vibrancy. Please use the comments section below to provide additional insight into how your community approaches this as a form of community and economic development.

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