



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: The Downtown School

By CED Program Interns & Students

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School may still be out for summer, but the CED blog is taking another look at the

role that education plays in community and economic development. As earlier posts on teacher housing developments, downtown community colleges, and, most recently, the repurposing of historic school buildings have examined, education can play a very important role in creating vibrant, thriving communities — places where people can live, work, play and learn.

In Winston-Salem, one can see those four ingredients all in action at The Downtown School, a public school serving students in kindergarten through eighth grade in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS) district. Housed in a 1925 building that was formerly part of the City Market in downtown Winston-Salem, the school is an example of what it may look like for a public school to be at the heart of a downtown.

Jan Atkinson, the principal at The Downtown School since the mid-1990s, said that the school operates under the idea that children “learn what they live.” The Downtown School started as a result of a partnership between WSFCS and RJR Nabisco’s Next Century Schools grant program. Jane Pfefferkorn, a longtime advocate for Winston-Salem’s public schools wrote the grant proposal for a hands-on, downtown school and The Downtown School began serving students in 1991.

Atkinson says that the school has grown along with downtown Winston-Salem in a mutually beneficial relationship. On the one hand, the urban landscape serves as an extended classroom for students at The Downtown School. Classes go to the public library to check out and read books, students swim at the local YMCA, and they visit the nearby fire station and police departments for field trips. Students are able to observe and participate in city parades and even work on projects at a local newspaper.

The school’s downtown location may be a contributing factor to its robust academic record and its low teacher turnover. According to the school’s official NC Schools Report Card from the 2013-2014 school year, The Downtown School’s students demonstrated a much higher performance than district and state averages on end-of-grade testing. Teacher turnover, an issue facing schools and districts across the state, is at 5.8% at The Downtown School—lower than both the district and state averages. More than 55% of teachers at The Downtown School have more than ten years of teaching experience, compared to 30% on average in WSFCS.

The Downtown School started with a few important stipulations in the original grant proposal, so it stands out even from other magnet schools in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. The district does not offer transportation for its students. In other schools, the lack of transportation can limit socioeconomic diversity, but Atkinson says that The Downtown School has not seen those issues. She said that some parents utilize public transportation to get their children to the school and that the school offers before and after school care (from 7am until 6pm) through the local YMCA so parents can organize their transportation around the workday. Families must apply to enroll in a magnet school like The Downtown School, but



this one in particular requires families to live or work in the central urban area of Winston-Salem or who are full-time employees at the school's primary business partner, Reynolds American Inc. Parents whose children are selected to attend the school are, however, required to volunteer at least one hour per week at the school (assisting teachers in their classrooms or on field trips, or supporting front office staff). To encourage diversity and equity within these requirements, the school's selection system is purely lottery-based. Even the principal's children had difficulty being selected—Atkinson said that even her son never got to attend The Downtown School and her daughter did not “win” the lottery until the end of elementary school.

Even with all of the benefits of a downtown location, one obvious downside is the cost of that potentially prime location. As a relatively small (approximately 385 students) preK-8 school, it still occupies a building of nearly 60,000 square feet on land valued at about \$650,000 per acre (the school is on a 0.67 acre parcel plus another 0.67 for parking and a 1 acre site where its playground sits). This is in contrast to other public schools in Forsyth County that sit on four times the acreage valued at just 23% of the downtown land. Atkinson confirms that the land cost and rising rental rates in downtown Winston-Salem are indeed limiting factors for charter schools and others who may be interested in establishing campuses downtown. Existing site control or significant financial assistance may be necessary to reap the apparent benefits of a downtown school.

Not every school can or necessarily should be in a downtown. Schools go where the need is. The Downtown School offers an intriguing model for what it can look like in communities that decide that the need for schools is in the heart of downtown. In this case, the school met a perfect storm of a willing school system, a motivated business partner, and crucial citizen support. Students, teachers, and staff seem to benefit from engaging with the city and the city seems to benefit from adding another level of vibrancy.

How does your community consider this type of opportunity? What limitations could there be for other places in North Carolina? Use the comments section below to continue the conversation around education and community and economic development.

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