



Linking Transit-Oriented Development, Families and Schools

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Introduction

Central to a vision of sustainable and equitable development is the goal of creating “complete communities,” whereby all residents, regardless of race or class, have equal access to jobs, services, and community amenities. Many policy leaders and planners see infill development, generally, and transit-oriented development (TOD), specifically, as key strategies to realize this goal. TOD is real estate development adjacent to transit hubs, with the primary goals of increasing transit use, decreasing private auto use, and increasing transit revenues. TOD generally takes a mixed-use approach that includes combining housing and retail/businesses close together in relatively high densities.

TOD projects have grown in number across the country in the last decade, but most TOD has produced higher-end housing, often targeted at empty nesters and/

or young, primarily childless professionals, as opposed to families.¹ Despite this trend, the goals of developing “complete communities” and many of the principles of TOD do align with the goals of community development practitioners—aiming to improve the quality of life and economic opportunity for low-income communities and communities of color. Accordingly, advocates and policy leaders are beginning to push more aspirational strategies of infill development and TOD that focus on a mix of jobs, shops, community services, and homes affordable to families across a mix of incomes.² By incorporating broad goals about serving families and mixed-income residents through TOD, these leaders aim for a different TOD model than has typically been seen across the country.

Bringing to fruition new, ambitious models of TOD that provide opportunities for families of varying incomes

will require new thinking by local agencies and developers. Implementing conventional TOD remains challenging; realizing more equity-oriented TOD will be even more so. When it comes to TOD that serves the needs of families, equity and access around educational opportunities for children should be top priorities. The interconnections between how and why families choose where to live and how that relates to their perception of access to high quality schools is a complex reality that is highly dependent on local contexts.³ Targeting families into mixed-income TOD requires a deeper understanding of these interconnections to ensure that TOD becomes a tool in equitable development and not a cause of exacerbated segregation. And, it will require a broader network of individual and institutional stakeholders to join TOD planning stages, most notably, families and local schools/school districts.

The Center for Cities & Schools (CC&S) at the University of California, Berkeley is currently exploring ways of making more equitable, “family-friendly” TOD a reality across the country. In the San Francisco Bay Area, our efforts include case study research that examines the relationships between TOD, families, and schools—with special consideration of the increasing educational opportunities available for children (e.g., magnet schools, small autonomous schools, charter schools, inter-district transfers, in order to realize the aspirational goals of TOD among area leaders.

Ten Core Connections between TOD, Families, and Schools

Through our action research with community stakeholders, city and school leaders, and young people, we have developed a list of Ten Core Connections between TOD and Education, which identify key considerations for fostering successful mixed-income, family-oriented TOD. The list provides guidance for policymakers, developers, community development practitioners and other stakeholders interested in promoting equitable TOD that serves the needs of families. Central to these connections is how transportation infrastructure can leverage additional benefits, notably supporting families and students and enhancing local schools.

1. School quality plays a major role in families’ housing choices. Access to quality schools plays a pivotal role in the housing choices families make. Thus, TOD that attracts families with school-aged children must include access to high-quality schools and other educational opportunities.⁴

2. A wide housing unit mix is needed to attract families. Unit mixes that include 3- and 4-bedroom apartments and townhomes offer family-friendly options. However, to make TOD more easily “pencil out,” developers have primarily built studios and 1-, and 2- bedroom apartments. While some of these units may attract younger couples,

larger families and households with older children require more bedroom space.

3. Housing unit mix, school enrollment, and school funding are intricately related. The majority of public schools are funded on the basis of their student enrollment numbers; new housing will likely affect enrollments at nearby schools, which by extension impacts school operations and school district funding. Enrollment and school capacity situations will differ from school to school, but in general, unexpected changes in enrollment—increases or decreases—are difficult for districts to manage and can be cause for tension.

4. Children often use transit to get to and from school and afterschool activities. Access to safe, reliable, and affordable transit facilitates students’ on-time and consistent arrival at school (reducing problems of truancy and tardiness) and to afterschool activities that enhance their educational experience. For many students, access to transit often means the difference between participating in or being excluded from these kinds of productive, engaging, and academically enriching opportunities.

5. Multi-modal transit alternatives support access to the increasing landscape of school options. The educational landscape across the country is continually changing, and students and families now have an increasing number of school options. Children do not always attend their closest neighborhood school; rather they may enroll in a charter or theme-based magnet school, a private school, or a school with specialized programs. Additionally, school districts may have an assignment policy that disperses students throughout the district to relieve overcrowding or integrate schools. Access to safe, affordable transportation options plays an important role in determining whether families have the opportunity to choose the most appropriate schools for their children from among multiple options.

6. Mixed-income TOD provides opportunities for educational workforce housing. The combination of modest teacher salaries and high housing costs often creates a challenge for school districts to retain high quality teachers. Mixed-income TOD could be an attractive incentive for area public school teachers and their families.

7. TOD design principles support walkability and safety for children and families. Across the country, researchers have seen drastic declines in the number of children walking and/or bicycling to school.⁵ TOD design principles inherently address concerns of distances between home and school, traffic, and “stranger danger.” First, TOD emphasizes pedestrian infrastructure, including sidewalks and crosswalks. Second, mixed-use TOD aims to create active, vibrant street life that increases safety through more “eyes on the street.” Finally, TOD’s outcome of increased

ridership enhances safety and reliability, increasing the demand and desirability of transit for families.

8. TOD brings amenities and services that can serve families closer to residential areas. The mixed-use nature of TOD provides opportunities for amenities and services that can attract and support children and families. For example, childcare centers and preschools located within or adjacent to TOD place these daily destinations within walking distance of transit, which may increase the likelihood that working parents utilize transit while balancing the logistics of getting to daycare and work each day.

9. When schools are integrated with TOD planning, opportunities emerge for the shared use of public space. In many infill locations, open space is lacking. If an existing school is located adjacent to or near the TOD, there are opportunities to use the school site as open space through shared use arrangements. Access to school site spaces for public use becomes an attractive amenity to families considering moving to a TOD, a way to build broader public support among childless residents for schools as community assets, and a strategic tool for developers to meet open space requirements for their new developments.

10. TOD offers opportunities for renovating and building new schools in developments, which draws families. Partnering with school districts can leverage additional capital resources to improve existing school buildings and/or to create small, charter, magnet, or other specially-focused schools. While most people tend to think of schools as stand-alone buildings, this does not necessarily have to be the case; in Portland, Oregon, for example, the public school district is leasing storefront space in a new, mixed use, affordable housing building.⁶

Overcoming Challenges and Leveraging Opportunities

While these Ten Core Connections may seem common sense, using these insights to leverage mixed-income, family-friendly TOD means swimming against a strong tide. Building mutually-beneficial and sustainable collaborative policies and practices between local governments and public school districts is tempered by a tenuous foundation of entirely separate governance structures, vastly different project and policy timeframes, and often competing state and/or local regulations. Most often, civic and educational leaders rarely work in tandem to leverage opportunities for integrated and mutually-beneficial outcomes.⁷ However, increasingly, school districts and cities recognize that they ultimately are serving the same constituents and families and are striving for many of the same goals—providing high quality education, housing, quality of life, and opportunity to all residents.

Thus, uncovering and understanding these intercon-

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nections should not provoke more finger-pointing, but rather generate a discussion on how these issues are related and how to design complimentary efforts for realistic “win-wins” making cities more attractive and livable. From our Ten Core Connections described above, we have identified four key areas of future work and research:

Collaborative, cross-sector partnerships can leverage opportunities linking TOD, families, and schools. Aligning the opportunities and mitigating the potential impacts TOD may have on schools will require collaborative, cross-sector partnership. In particular, local public school districts need to be active participants in the TOD planning processes. The Ten Core Connections presented in this paper provide the rationale for including school districts as key stakeholders in TOD planning, and begin to illuminate the incentives for schools to participate. Planning for population and school enrollment changes linked to a TOD appears to be a natural converging point of interest; the potential for the joint use of public spaces or inclusion of small specialty schools in a TOD is another, and can only happen through partnerships across agencies.

The “story” of TOD can more explicitly include families and schools. The overall “story” of TOD can better support the goal of mixed-income, family-oriented housing. Given that TOD is largely aimed at young professionals and empty nesters, neither of whom is expected to have children, considering schools in relation to TOD may seem unnecessary. However, market demand among young professionals can change over time.⁸ When couples without children living in a TOD have children, they are more-or-less forced to relocate to accommodate their growing family, often giving up their multi-modal lifestyle. TOD focused at least in part on accommodating families can both attract new populations to TOD living and help retain current residents in TOD areas. The case for creating mixed-income TOD will provide the opportunity for families that would not otherwise have access to such transit-accessible housing to cut down on both their housing and commuting costs. Given the realities of implementing TOD, including affordable, family-oriented housing is no easy task; developers and cities will need additional policy mechanisms and financial subsidy to do so.

Capacity-building is needed to support cross-sector partnerships. Effective cross-sector partnerships are built upon trust, communication, and procedural tools. Stakeholders may be engaging in such partnerships for the first time and could benefit from capacity-building that prepares them to be more effective partners. Our research has revealed diverse stakeholders—including elected leadership, city and school district staff, and private (for- and non-profit) developers—who each play critical roles in planning and implementing TOD and need capacity-building support to engage in collaborative TOD planning. We identify four key capacity-building areas:

1. *Communications infrastructure.* Formal and informal avenues of communication are critical to sustained collaboration and trust building; “2x2” committees (where the district superintendent and school board chair meet with the mayor and city manager), quarterly joint city council-school board meetings, or other consistent modes of communication are all good options.

2. *Data- and information-sharing.* Data is of critical importance in conversations about schools and development. However, there is no single, easily accessible source of data on both cities and schools. For example, the question of how many students a new housing development will generate requires a system and set of resources where planners and districts can agree on demographic projections.

3. *Incremental successes.* Trust and collaboration can be built on diverse projects and initiatives. Often, districts and cities collaborate at a smaller scale, for example sharing school resource officers or after school programming, which can lay the foundation for partnerships in bigger infrastructure and development projects. While a crossing guard program may seem small compared to a large infrastructure development initiative, this incremental success serves as a foundation for relationship building, and its success can be leveraged for larger projects in the future.

4. *Points of effective partnership/engagement.* To determine the best time, place, and reason for schools’ engagement, all stakeholders must understand TOD and school-related planning and implementation processes, what specific action occurs in those phases, and how any impacts are most directly relevant to the work of cities and school districts. For example, while planning processes set the stage for land allotment, it may not be until the implementation phase that the unit mix of a TOD is set, thus determining actual student generation rates. Likewise, different phases of the process provide opportunities to leverage city and school constituencies. For example, students may participate in a TOD planning process as part of a service-learning class, and subsequently bring their parents into planning activities, thus providing develop-

ers and planners with access to a broader constituency. Further, schools may use public meetings during an implementation phase to reach other city residents who may have an interest in supporting schools and/or joint use of school facilities.

Performance measures and outcome indicators are needed to assess successful TOD outcomes supporting families and schools. To effectively align and assess TOD outcomes that simultaneously support equitable development, families and schools, districts, cities, and developers need established performance measures and outcome indicators. While conventional TOD success metrics focus on revenue for transit agencies and increased transit ridership, the idea of “TOD 3.0” has been proposed, in which “Livability Benefits” become the driver of the technical processes of transit and land use planning for TOD.⁹ Education-related components are narrowly defined around early childhood education, out of school time, charter schools, and magnet schools¹⁰ – not considering the bevy of other traditional public school district and school site initiatives and opportunities that interrelate with TOD efforts. However, even when benchmarks are set for these types of quality of life issues,¹¹ there is limited focus on operationalizing what this means in practice for families—especially where schools and the inclusion of school site and district stakeholders are concerned. Further research and case study development should be utilized to construct tangible performance measures and outcome indicators for successful TOD planning processes and outcomes that support families and local schools.

Conclusion

Improving cities and improving schools go hand in hand; one will likely only be successful in tandem with the other. Opportunities exist to use TOD to increase transit ridership, create great communities, realize equitable development, support families, and provide high quality educational options for all children. While transit agencies and private developers have driven the TOD concept, community development practitioners are increasingly seeing the power of building community connections and enhancing quality of life for all residents through this emerging development tool. **CI**

The Center for Cities & Schools (CC&S) is an action-oriented think tank and interdisciplinary initiative between the University of California, Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education and the College of Environmental Design. CC&S works to position high quality education as an essential component of urban and metropolitan vitality to create equitable, healthy, and sustainable cities and schools for all.

Endnotes

Making the Connection: Transit-Oriented Development and Jobs

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