

# When Historic Neighborhood Schools Are Threatened: The Watts Elementary School Experience

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# Presentation Roadmap

- **The Watts Elementary School experience:**
  - Background
  - Challenge
  - Strategy
  - Actions
  - Response
- **Moving from actions to outcomes**
- **Questions and discussion about the case study report**

Case Study Description:

# Background

- **George Watts Elementary School in 1990:**
  - Located in Trinity Park neighborhood - downtown Durham
  - Built in 1919; no significant changes during lifetime
  - Serves several adjacent urban neighborhoods
  - Diverse student population of about 280
  - Facilities overcrowded and in increasing disrepair

Case Study Description:

# Background

- **Strong neighborhood support for school:**
  - Trinity Park Neighborhood Association – active role in preserving urban neighborhoods
  - School perceived as important and cohesive contributor to the neighborhood and sense of community
  - Excellent communication between neighborhood association, school principal, PTA, and Durham's inter-neighborhood council
  - Neighborhood also supports the Durham city school system; in 1990, a Trinity Park resident served on the school board

Case Study Description:

# Background

- **In 1990, N.C. Department of Public Instruction does not support historic neighborhood schools:**
  - Facility guidelines recommend that elementary school designs: serve >450 students, occupy > 14 acres, include classrooms ranging from 850-1200 ft<sup>2</sup>, meet Class II fire standards, include a 1-floor footprint
  - No policies about smart growth or preserving historic neighborhood schools
  - Cost comparison guidelines for facility decisions vague, ignore important design issues, and assume renovation costs exceed those of new construction
  - Architects with renovation expertise not consulted when facility guidelines prepared

Case Study Description:

# Background

- **Durham City School Board considering future of its older schools during 1990:**
  - Wrestling with citizen concerns about finances, infrastructure, decaying schools, merger with surrounding county school system
  - Dependent on consultants for expert advice about school construction and renovation
  - No policies about smart growth or preserving historic neighborhood schools
  - Under increasing pressure to spend school construction and renovation bond money approved several years previously
  - Authorizes consulting architects to conduct feasibility studies about school renovation and construction during 1991
  - Identifies three older elementary schools (Powe, Watts, and Club) as potential candidates for repair or renovation

## Case Study Description:

# Challenge

- **In early 1992, consultant's informal progress report indicates that Watts Elementary School does not meet state guidelines and recommends closing the school**
  - Durham City School Board indicates that this assessment precludes renovation of Watts School
  - School Board requests reports on feasibility studies by April and announces that final decisions will be made by June, 1992
- **The School Board's schedule permits five months to develop a case for saving the school**

## Case Study Description:

# Strategy

- **Neighborhood strategy for saving Watts Elementary School:**
  1. Request that School Board form advisory committee to evaluate consultant's feasibility reports and recommendations
  2. Ensure that committee membership represents all historic neighborhood schools being studied by School Board
  3. Conduct independent analysis of consultant's Watts School study for committee and School Board
  4. Prepare independent Watts School renovation plan and cost estimate for committee and School Board
  5. Work with Committee to create written report and to distribute report widely -- to School Board, City Council, neighborhoods, inter-neighborhood council, and media



## Case Study Description:

# Actions

- 1. Request that School Board form advisory committee to evaluate consultant's feasibility reports and recommendations:**
  - Met with individual School Board members to explain the benefits of an advisory committee
  - Met with neighborhoods and PTA's for Powe and Club Elementary Schools to enlist their support and participation
  - Met with Durham's inter-neighborhood council to enlist support and advocacy
  - ***Result: School Board agreed to form advisory committee and to receive a written report of its recommendations by June 1992***

## Case Study Description:

# Actions

## 2. Ensure that committee membership represents all historic neighborhood schools being studied by School Board:

- Committee representatives defined to include *official* spokespersons from neighborhood associations & school PTA's, as well as school principals
- Representatives agreed that independent analyses of the consultants' feasibility reports and proposals for appropriate renovations would be prepared for each elementary school and then combined for presentation to the School Board
- Representatives agreed on the importance of reaching consensus on value of historic neighborhood schools
- ***Result: Effective representation, division of labor, and recognition of the importance of consensus recommendations***

## Case Study Description:

# Actions

### 3. Independent analysis of consultant's Watts School feasibility study demonstrated:

- Ability to renovate school to meet state school guidelines
- Consultant underestimated cost estimates for new school construction
- Consultant overestimated cost estimates for renovation of existing school
- Cost of renovating existing school should be equivalent to consultant's cost estimate for building new school
- ***Result: Committee representatives for Watts School agreed to develop renovation plan and cost estimates***

## Case Study Description:

# Actions

### 4. The Watts School representatives developed renovation plans and cost estimates that demonstrated:

- Renovated school would meet state building and safety guidelines
- Renovated school would have classrooms that meet or exceed state guidelines for size
- Renovated school would have recommended facilities (e.g., library, cafeteria) that meet or exceed state guidelines for size
- Cost of renovating school for 400 students would be equivalent to consultant's cost estimate for building new school for 300 students
- ***Result: objective evaluation demonstrates feasibility of renovating historic neighborhood school***

## Case Study Description:

# Actions

## 5. Committee prepared and presented written report to School Board in June 1992:

- Consensus report and degree of neighborhood-school participation and review significantly strengthened report's impact
- Report and underlying committee analyses persuaded School Board that consultant's recommendations were not appropriate
- Additional analysis of actual costs for new school construction vs. renovation strengthened School Board's recognition that renovation may be economically viable
- ***Result: School Board agreed to fund architects to prepare detailed designs and cost estimates to implement Committee's recommendations***

Case Study Description:

# Response

- **Ultimately, Durham School Board authorized about \$ 12 million for renovation of Watts, Powe, and Club elementary schools**
- **School Board received strong city-wide support for renovating historic neighborhood schools**

# Moving from Actions to Outcomes

- **The Watts Elementary School experience illustrates that intervention actions can result in renovating threatened historic neighborhood schools**
- **What *prospective* actions can lead to the desired outcomes – i.e., widespread recognition of the benefits of historic neighborhood schools ?**

# Moving from Actions to Outcomes

- **Recognize that most School Boards do not have the expertise to develop or defend appropriate policies**
- **Collaborate with other organizations to:**
  - Document the community benefits of historic neighborhood schools
  - Document the educational benefits of historic neighborhood schools
  - Document the benefits of small-scale neighborhood schools
  - Develop model smart growth policies that include guidelines for preserving historic neighborhood schools
  - Encourage State & local School Boards to adopt these policies



Questions and discussion about the  
case study report . . .