

Vacant Schools in Englewood Open Doors for Economic Growth Opportunities – White Paper



[A Creative Solution from a Growing Problem in Public Education]

With various social ills plaguing the Englewood community it is essential for residents and key stakeholders to organize and collaborate in order to work towards positive change and economic vitality. This white paper will examine how a community like Englewood can possibly leverage institutional assets and human capital in order to repurpose a closed school building to meet the immediate and long term economic needs of the community.

December 12, 2013

By Asiaha Butler, Co-Founder and President of R.A.G.E.

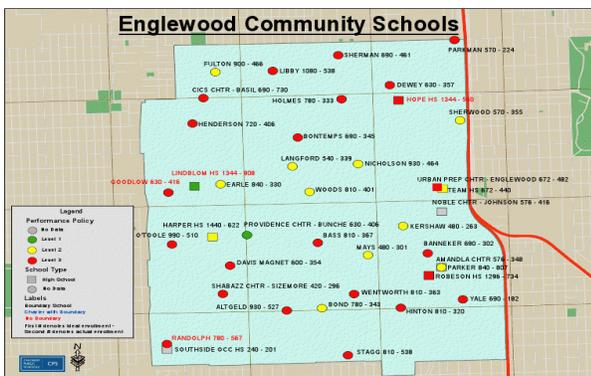
Background

The Greater Englewood neighborhood which includes West Englewood and Englewood is considered to some as the classic “urban failure” of a metropolitan city. The neighborhood is home to 34 schools and according to the data of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) over 90% of the schools in this community is underutilized due to a decrease in population. Of the 34 schools 23 of these schools are classified as “level 3” which is considered a low performing school. In 2013, CPS shuttered six of these schools which have devastated many of the families, students and community at-large. According to the 2010 Census data, the current population of Greater Englewood is



The Challenge

The Englewood community is currently on the losing end of an economic war. Outside of having the highest unemployment rates in Chicago and 40% of the population is living below the poverty level, this community was recently hit with over 5 neighborhood schools being shuttered due to the school’s district under-utilization factors. Due to the demographic makeup of the community, Greater Englewood is unfortunately made up of many failing schools, high crime, rapid foreclosures and increasingly high unemployment rates.



approximately 75,000 residents and 99% of these residents are African-American with an average of about 40% of the people live below the poverty level. Englewood’s youth population (18 and under) is approximately 38% of the total population and 39% of the population do not have a high school diploma in comparison to 20% of the City of Chicago. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).



With these social ills plaguing the area it is essential for residents to organize in order to work towards positive change and economic vitality. This white paper will examine how a community like Englewood can leverage institutional assets and human capital in order to repurpose a closed school building to meet the immediate and long term economic needs of the community.

The Solution

The City of Chicago experienced one of the largest school reforms in the country, due to budget cuts, declining enrollment, and low performance. This inevitably leaves shuttered buildings as vacant, deteriorating properties that attract vandals and illicit activity posing an additional liability to the neighborhood. A creative solution to combat this outcome while enriching Englewood's economic and social vitality is to repurpose a vacated school building into a multi-purpose community operated innovation and incubator center.

With so many schools being closed in an already socially deprived area, another vacant building will only contribute to the hopelessness that is a resounding theme in the neighborhood. In the last 10 years, Englewood has undergone 9 school closings, turnarounds or phase outs and in 2013 the community experienced more school closings. (CPS Data, 2013).

Let Hope Rise

A strategy that can be applied to support community is to allow these closed schools to be repurposed to an institution that will serve as a beacon of hope to an economically depressed area. Englewood could benefit greatly if these vacant spaces are reopened and used to spark economic development and other activities that will cater to the needs of the community.

Employ Local Residents

This innovative approach can serve as a way to employ residents, provide recreation for the youth, training for adults and encourage a space for collaboration which currently non-existent in Englewood. In my research, I found a variation of practical school planning and management theories (Abramson, 2008), as well as community repurposing and economic

development models (Erickson, 2013). Some of the research I've identified with school planning and management theories mainly spoke about how school buildings can be repurposed using an adaptive reuse strategy (Spector, 2003). Erickson argues that many school districts are finding the need for less space due to a decline in student enrollments. He also researched that many school districts faced with this problem similarly to CPS created facility use task forces. As Spector argues, "Reuse can create valuable community resources from unproductive property, substantially reduce land acquisitions and construction costs, revitalize existing neighborhoods and help control sprawl." (2003). With resources allocated for proper planning these methods of reuse strategies can serve as a catalyst to social change for Englewood.



happening in Englewood and many other neighborhoods in Chicago.

Step-by-Step Plan

- 1) Involve key community stakeholders (residents, developers, architects, facility managers, banks, funders, business owners, etc.) in the development and researches of existing reuse models in order to adapt an official repurpose school initiative.
- 2) Develop funding incentives for community led parties from private and public (i.e. TIFs, Tax Credits, Historical Preservation Credits, etc.) sectors to ensure sustainability for the planning and maintenance of these repurposed spaces.
- 3) Secure community-based and operated Facility Management Company to ensure private developers are not the only “interested parties” cashing in on these public institutions. Private developers should adhere by an community driven benefit agreement if they are interested in these public spaces.
- 4) Pilot concept in Englewood, who is in dire need of economic vitality strategies then replicate the model throughout the communities mostly impacted by school closings.

Conclusion

In an area that is faced with so many challenges, it would be interesting to see how this community can use human capital, social activism, community engagement methods and revitalization strategies to spur economic development by repurposing vacant school buildings. The newly repurposed institution could bring jobs, training resources, business support services and other tools that could help end the economic war that is



Sources

- Abramson, P. (2008). School construction report: a supplement to school planning and management. http://www.peterli.com/spm.pdfs/con_st_report_2008.pdf. School Planning and Management.
- Chicago Public School Data (2012)
- Erickson, P. (2010). Close calls. When schools shut down, administrators must decide how to use these landmarks. American School & University
- KCMDS Repurposing Guidebook. University of Missouri Kansas City. (2010). http://www.umkc.edu/news/announcements/UMKC_KCMSD_Guidebook_2011web.pdf
- PEW Trust Report. (2010). *Closing public schools in Philadelphia: lessons from six urban districts, learning from the past.* http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_Initiative/Closing-Public-Schools-Philadelphia.pdf
- Spector, S. (2003). Creating schools and strengthening communities through adaptive reuse. *National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities.*
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Englewood, Chicago