

## PLANNING FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

In the early 20th century, most elementary, middle and high schools existed within communities and served as gathering places, within walking distance of many of the school's students. More recently though, schools have been increasingly separated from the communities they were built to serve. School boards, other elected officials and planning commission members all play a part in the decision making process regarding how and where schools are sited. Nationally, increasing attention is being paid to the link between our built environment and childhood and adult obesity. Siting schools so children have the opportunity to walk to them recognizes this linkage and may help prevent unhealthy long-term consequences. Several partnerships have been formed in recent years to encourage the spatial and social connection between neighborhoods and schools.

Established in May 2006, the National Center for Safe Routes to School (SRTS) assists communities in enabling and encouraging children to safely walk and bike to school. The group seeks to provide SRTS programs throughout the country with the knowledge and technical information to implement safe and successful strategies. SRTS programs use a variety of education, engineering and



enforcement strategies that help make routes safer for children to walk and bicycle to school and encouragement strategies to entice more children to walk and bike. They have grown popular in recent years in response to problems created by an expanding built environment, a growing reliance on motor vehicles for student transportation and with the more recent development of federal and state funding of SRTS programs. SRTS programs can improve safety not just for children, but for a community of pedestrians and bicyclists. They provide opportunities for people to become more physically active and to rely less on their cars. SRTS programs benefit the environment and a community's quality of life by reducing traffic congestion and motor vehicle emissions. For communities concerned about traffic jams, unsafe walking conditions, physically inactive lifestyles and overall quality of life, SRTS programs can be an effective starting point for tackling these issues.

The Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) describes a community school as "both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities." U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has shown support for the community schools model. The Race to the Top Fund, created by the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, offers states \$4.35 billion in incentives to spur education reforms. Tennessee and Delaware were awarded funding in the first round, though Georgia placed as a finalist. The State of Tennessee has made significant progress on many fronts with regard to education reform. A community schools effort in Nashville, TN is an example.



Alignment Nashville (AN) is a unique and scalable framework for developing community schools. The mission is to bring community organizations and resources into alignment so that their coordinated support of Nashville's youth has a positive impact on public school success, children's health, and the success of the community as a whole. In the past, over 175 nonprofit organizations worked in the schools and community individually, without direction or coordination. AN has developed processes for collaboration that align the resources of these organizations to the Metro Nashville Public Schools strategic plan and to community strategic plans, aligning the city's resources toward common goals.

By providing safe routes for children to walk or bike to school and reintegrating schools into our communities, more linkages for partnerships and cooperation are being created that may benefit not only our children, but our communities as a whole.

*More information on this topic can be found at the following sites:*

**Schools and Communities Resource Center**—[www.atlantaregional.com/schoolsandcommunities](http://www.atlantaregional.com/schoolsandcommunities)

**National Center for Safe Routes to School**—[www.saferoutesinfo.org](http://www.saferoutesinfo.org)

**Coalition for Community Schools**—[www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org)

## Upcoming Events

### GMA Annual Convention and Training

June 26-29, 2010—Savannah, GA

For more information visit [www.gmanet.com](http://www.gmanet.com)

### DCA Community Planning Institute

July 13-14, 2010—Helen, GA

For more information call 404-679-5279

### ACCG Summer Regional Training

July 16, 2010—Gainesville and Tifton, GA

For more information visit [www.accg.org](http://www.accg.org)