



The Case for Preserving Ephesus Elementary: The Impacts of Neighborhood Schools on Students and Community in Chapel Hill, North Carolina

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JANUARY 2026



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1. Introduction

The potential closure of Ephesus Elementary School, located on Ephesus Church Road in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has become a focal point of concern for parents, students, and the broader community. As the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (CHCCS) Board of Education deliberates which schools to close in response to financial pressures and declining enrollment, it is imperative to examine the unique and multifaceted value that Ephesus Elementary brings to its students and the surrounding neighborhood. This report synthesizes extensive academic research, policy analyses, local data, and case studies to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of the positive and negative impacts of neighborhood elementary schools—particularly those with high rates of walking and biking, deep integration with community parks, and a strong sense of local identity. The findings are intended to inform advocacy efforts and support a compelling case for keeping Ephesus Elementary open as a cornerstone of the Chapel Hill community.

2. Local Context: Chapel Hill Policy, Demographics, and Ephesus Elementary's Profile

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools operates within a policy environment shaped by state funding formulas, local government planning, and community expectations. The district has experienced a significant decline in enrollment, with a reported drop of approximately 1,000 students in the 2024-2025 school year, resulting in budget shortfalls and the elimination of more than 80 positions.^{1 2} These financial constraints have led the district to consider consolidating elementary schools, which are currently the most under-enrolled segment.³ Funding is closely tied to average daily attendance, making the retention of stu-

dents and the maintenance of vibrant, accessible schools a fiscal as well as educational priority.⁴

The Town of Chapel Hill and Orange County have long prioritized the synchronization of residential development with the availability of school facilities. The Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (SAPFO) requires that new residential developments obtain a Certificate of Adequacy of Public School Facilities, ensuring that school capacity is not exceeded and that neighborhood schools remain accessible to local families.^{5 6 7} Recent bond referendums and capital improvement plans have focused on renovating and replacing aging school facilities, with an emphasis on safety, modernization, and accessibility.^{8 9 10} However, the current round of proposed closures has raised concerns about the potential loss of walkable, community-embedded schools like Ephesus Elementary, which serve as neighborhood anchors and provide daily opportunities for active transportation and community engagement.¹¹

Ephesus Elementary itself is a public school serving grades Prekindergarten through 5th, with an enrollment of approximately 389 students as of the 2023-2024 school year.^{12 13} The student-teacher ratio is 11:1, significantly lower than the North Carolina state average of 15:1.^{14 15 16 17} The school's student body is diverse: 53% White, 16% Black, 14% Hispanic, 12% Asian, and 5% identifying as two or more races.¹⁸ Minority enrollment stands at 47%, and about 33% of students are eligible for free lunch.^{19 20 21} Ephesus Elementary consistently ranks in the top 20% of North Carolina public schools for overall test scores, with 70-74% of students achieving proficiency in math (state average: 51%) and 60-64% in reading/language arts (state average: 50%).^{22 23 24 25 26 17 27} The school's growth score

places it in the 74th percentile statewide, indicating above-average academic progress.²⁸

3. Walkability, School Access, and Integration with Community Parks

A defining feature of Ephesus Elementary is its location within a walkable, residential neighborhood. The school is directly accessible via sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, and greenways, and is supported by the Town of Chapel Hill's Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program.^{29 30 31} The SRTS initiative, part of the town's Vision Zero strategy, aims to improve safety and connectivity for students walking, biking, or rolling to school.³² Ephesus Elementary is specifically highlighted in the SRTS Action Plan, which documents infrastructure improvements such as enhanced crosswalks with flashing beacons, dedicated bike lanes, and the presence of crossing guards.^{33 34}

Community feedback collected through the SRTS program indicates that the sidewalk from the street to the school is heavily used by walkers, bikers, and families with strollers, reflecting the high proportion of students who walk or bike to school daily.³⁵ Parents and community members have advocated for further improvements, such as wider sidewalks, additional signage, and traffic calming measures, to enhance safety and accessibility. The integration of Ephesus Elementary with local parks and recreational facilities further strengthens its role as a community hub, providing shared spaces for play, sports, and social interaction outside of school hours.

The benefits of walkable school access are well-documented in both local and national studies. The Town of Chapel Hill's SRTS Action Plan cites research showing that walking and biking to school enhances students'

physical and mental health, improves learning outcomes, and fosters independence.³⁶

³⁷ Increased rates of active transportation also reduce traffic congestion, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and contribute to a safer, more livable neighborhood environment.^{38 39 40}

4. Academic Performance and Educational Outcomes

A substantial body of academic literature supports the positive impacts of neighborhood schools, particularly those embedded within walkable residential areas. Students who attend schools close to home experience higher rates of attendance, greater parental involvement, and stronger social cohesion.³⁷ Proximity to school is a significant predictor of student academic achievement, attendance, and engagement.⁴¹ For example, a large-scale study in Los Angeles found that children living closer to their school were significantly more likely to walk, and that walking rates were positively associated with academic performance and engagement.⁴¹ A cross-sectional study in Scotland found that students in the most walkable neighborhoods were 80% more likely to use active travel for all or most journeys.⁴²

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews confirm that school proximity is a critical factor in educational equity and access.^{43 44} Regular attendance is a foundational predictor of academic success, and neighborhood schools excel in this domain.^{45 46} Chronic absenteeism is linked to lower standardized test scores, reduced engagement, and higher dropout rates.^{47 48} Neighborhood schools foster a strong sense of school belonging, which is closely tied to academic achievement, motivation, and positive behavior.^{49 50 51}

Physical activity, enabled by walking or biking to school, is associated with better cardio-

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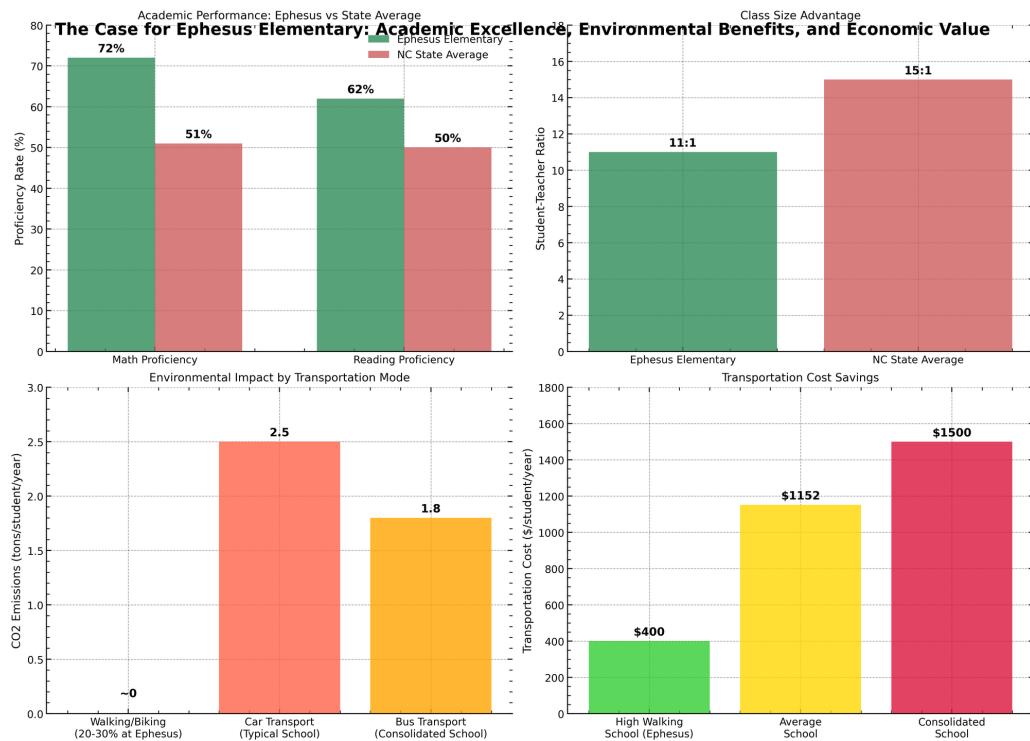


Figure 1: fig

vascular fitness, healthier body weight, and a lower risk of obesity.^{52 53 54} Physical activity is also linked to improved classroom behavior, attention, and executive function.^{55 56 57} The presence of green spaces and parks adjacent to schools, as is the case with Ephesus Elementary, further enhances these benefits.^{58 59 60}

Neighborhood schools also serve as vital hubs for community engagement, parental involvement, and the development of social capital.^{61 62 63} Parental involvement is a powerful predictor of student achievement, aspirations, and positive school behaviors.⁶⁴ Community schools—those deeply integrated into their neighborhoods—are associated with stronger social cohesion, trust, and collective efficacy.^{65 66}

5. Environmental and Health Benefits

Reduced Transportation Emissions and Carbon Footprint Neighborhood schools with high rates of walking and biking, such as Ephesus Elementary, directly reduce the number of car and bus trips required for school commutes. This reduction translates into a measurable decrease in the school's carbon footprint. Empirical studies estimate that living in a walkable environment can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 4 tons per household per year compared to automobile-dependent suburbs.⁶⁷ The transportation sector is the second-largest producer of CO₂ emissions globally, accounting for 24% of emissions from fuel combustion.⁶⁸ Shifting even a modest proportion of school commutes from cars and buses to active transportation can have a significant cumulative

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impact on local and regional air quality and climate goals.⁶⁹

Reducing the number of vehicles around schools not only cuts greenhouse gas emissions but also improves local air quality. Children are especially vulnerable to the health effects of air pollution, including particulate matter (PM2.5) and nitrogen oxides, which are linked to respiratory and cognitive health problems.⁷⁰ By contrast, neighborhood schools with high rates of active commuting are less likely to be situated on major arterial roads and more likely to be surrounded by residential streets with lower traffic volumes.⁷¹

Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention Active transportation increases daily physical activity levels among children, helping them meet the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' recommendation of at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day.⁷² Children who walk or bike to school accumulate approximately 20 additional minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) on weekdays compared to those who travel by car or bus.⁷³ This increase in activity is associated with better cardiovascular fitness, healthier body weight, and a lower risk of obesity.^{74 75}

Mental Health and Well-Being Active transportation to school is linked to improved mental health and psychological well-being. Walking or biking to school provides children with opportunities for social interaction, exposure to nature, and a sense of independence, all of which contribute to positive emotions and reduced stress.^{76 77 78} Children who walk or bike to school at a young age are significantly more likely to continue these behaviors as they grow older, leading to sustained health benefits over the life course.^{79 80}

Safety and Injury Prevention Well-designed Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs and infrastructure improvements can mitigate traffic safety risks. SRTS initiatives, which include sidewalk construction, crosswalks, traffic calming, and educational campaigns, have been shown to increase rates of walking and biking to school while reducing pedestrian injuries.^{81 82} For example, New York City's SRTS program led to a 33–44% reduction in injuries among school-aged children and was found to be cost-effective.⁸³

6. Community Engagement, Social Cohesion, and Neighborhood Identity

Neighborhood elementary schools like Ephesus Elementary are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and physical fabric of their communities, serving as vital hubs for civic engagement, social cohesion, and intergenerational connection. Schools embedded within residential areas serve as gateways to a wide range of resources—informational, material, and social—that extend far beyond their educational mission.⁸⁴ These resources include access to playgrounds and parks, meeting spaces for community events, and venues for civic activities such as elections, public forums, and cultural celebrations.⁸⁵

A robust body of research demonstrates that neighborhood schools foster higher levels of parent and community involvement compared to schools that draw from larger, more dispersed catchment areas.^{86 87} Parental involvement is strongly correlated with improved student outcomes, including higher academic achievement, better attendance, and lower dropout rates.^{88 89 90} Neighborhood schools also provide opportunities for parents to build social capital—networks of relationships that facilitate the exchange of information, resources, and support.^{91 92}

The integration of schools with local parks and playgrounds, as is the case with Ephesus Elementary, amplifies their role as community anchors. Access to green spaces and recreational facilities is associated with increased physical activity, improved mental health, and enhanced opportunities for social interaction.^{93 94 95} The proximity of parks and playgrounds to schools increases their utilization by both students and community members, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in these shared spaces.^{96 97}

Neighborhood schools play a central role in shaping neighborhood identity and fostering social cohesion. They serve as landmarks that orient residents' understanding of space and provide a focal point for community life.⁹⁸ Regular, repeated interactions at the school—whether through drop-off and pick-up routines, school events, or use of playgrounds—create opportunities for residents to build trust, form friendships, and develop a sense of belonging.^{99 100}

7. Economic Impacts and Cost-Effectiveness

Direct Financial Costs of School Transportation School transportation is a significant and growing expense for public school districts nationwide. In the 2018–19 school year, the average expenditure for public school student transportation was \$1,152 per student transported, a figure that has risen steadily over the past decades and now accounts for approximately 3.5–4.2% of all K-12 expenditures.^{101 102 103} Districts with more consolidated schools, larger catchment areas, and less walkable infrastructure face higher transportation costs per student.^{104 105} In contrast, schools located within dense, walkable neighborhoods—where a significant proportion of students can walk or bike—have demonstrably lower transportation costs.¹⁰⁴

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Cost-Effectiveness of Neighborhood Schools

Neighborhood schools like Ephesus Elementary, where a large proportion of students walk or bike, offer a clear cost advantage. The Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program, which funds infrastructure improvements to support walking and biking, has demonstrated benefit-to-cost ratios as high as 4.4:1, with societal economic benefits—including reduced injury rates, improved health outcomes, and lower transportation costs—far exceeding the initial investment.^{107 108 109}

The Myth of Guaranteed Savings from Consolidation

While school district consolidation is often promoted as a means to achieve economies of scale and reduce per-pupil costs, the evidence is mixed and context-dependent. Consolidation can yield administrative savings, particularly in very small districts, but these savings are often offset by increased transportation costs, transition expenses, and, in some cases, higher personnel costs due to salary equalization across merged districts.^{110 111 112 113} In larger districts, the cost savings from consolidation are minimal or nonexistent, and capital costs may actually increase.¹¹⁴

Neighborhood Schools and Local Property Values

A robust body of research demonstrates that the presence of a high-quality, walkable neighborhood school significantly boosts local property values. For every dollar spent on public schools in a community, home values increase by an estimated \$20.^{115 116} Homes located within the attendance zones of top-rated schools command price premiums of 10–20% or more compared to similar homes in average-performing districts.^{117 118} Proximity matters as well: homes within a half-mile of a highly-rated elementary school

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have been shown to sell for 9% more than comparable homes farther away.¹¹⁹

Conversely, the closure of a neighborhood school can have a negative impact on local property values, particularly in established residential areas. Studies in Ohio found that consolidation and school closures lowered property values by an average of \$3,000 per household, after controlling for student performance and property tax rates.¹²⁰ The loss of a neighborhood school reduces the appeal of the area to families with children, potentially leading to decreased demand, slower home sales, and, over time, neighborhood decline.^{121 122}

8. Case Studies and Best Practices: Successful Neighborhood Schools

Numerous case studies across the United States and internationally demonstrate the success of neighborhood schools integrated with community facilities and high rates of walking and biking.

- **Pioneer Elementary School, Auburn, Washington:** After infrastructure improvements and SRTS programs, the percentage of students walking or biking to school increased significantly, with reductions in transportation costs and improvements in student health and academic performance.^{123 124}
- **Mueller Community, Austin, Texas:** Designed as a walkable, mixed-use community with a centrally located elementary school and integrated parks, 70.5% of residents reported higher levels of physical activity, and 51.6% reported better health after moving to Mueller.^{125 126 127} Social cohesion increased markedly, and the school and its adjacent parks serve as focal points for community life.^{128 129}
- **Community School Parks, Los Angeles and**

San Antonio: Initiatives to open school playgrounds and fields to the public during non-school hours provided safe, accessible park space in underserved neighborhoods, leading to improvements in student health, academic performance, and neighborhood safety.^{130 131 132 133}

- **Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Programs**

Nationwide: SRTS programs have been implemented in thousands of schools, with consistent evidence of increased rates of walking and biking, improved safety, and positive health outcomes.^{134 135 136 137}

- **North Carolina's Active Routes to School (ARTS) Project:** Over 850 schools have participated, with a 31% increase in biking and walking to school over five years.^{138 139 136 140}

Quantitative data from these and other case studies show that schools with high walkability and community integration achieve higher rates of physical activity, better academic outcomes, stronger social cohesion, and increased property values.

9. Potential Challenges and Detrimental Impacts

While the benefits of neighborhood schools are substantial, it is important to acknowledge potential challenges and negative impacts, particularly when schools are closed or consolidated.

Educational Equity and Segregation Neighborhood schools can inadvertently perpetuate educational inequities, particularly when residential patterns are shaped by historical and ongoing segregation by race and income.^{141 142 143} Schools serving higher concentrations of low-income students and students of color are more likely to have less experienced teachers, higher teacher turnover, fewer advanced courses, and inadequate facilities.^{141 144 145 146} In North Car-

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olina, high-poverty schools—often neighborhood schools—provide less access to gifted programs, advanced coursework, and high-quality educators, with students of color disproportionately affected.^{146 147}

Resource Limitations and Facility Maintenance Neighborhood schools, especially those in less affluent areas, frequently face significant challenges in maintaining their facilities and accessing the resources needed to provide a high-quality education.^{148 149} The reliance on local property taxes for school funding exacerbates these disparities.¹⁵⁰ Nationally, half of all public school buildings are over 50 years old, and a majority require major repairs or renovations.^{152 153} Poor facility conditions are linked to lower student achievement, higher absenteeism, and increased teacher turnover.^{154 155}

Challenges with Integration and Diversity Neighborhood schools may limit opportunities for students to interact with peers from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.^{142 143} Efforts to promote integration—such as redrawing attendance zones or implementing controlled choice policies—can be politically contentious but are necessary to ensure diversity and equity.^{156 157 158}

Limitations in Specialized Programs and Services Smaller neighborhood schools may struggle to offer the full range of specialized programs and services available in larger or more centrally located schools.^{159 160} This includes gifted and talented programs, advanced coursework, special education services, and extracurricular activities.^{159 160}

Facility Management and Operational Challenges Maintaining high standards of cleanliness, safety, and functionality in school facilities is a complex and resource-intensive

task, particularly for smaller schools with limited budgets.^{148 152} Deferred maintenance can lead to negative outcomes, including health risks, operational disruptions, and poor academic performance.^{148 161}

Impacts of School Closures School closures disrupt students' educational trajectories, leading to declines in academic achievement, increased absenteeism, and behavioral issues—especially for displaced students and those in receiving schools.^{162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169 170 171 172 173} Closures erode social ties, reduce civic engagement, and can lead to population decline in affected neighborhoods.^{174 175} They disproportionately affect disadvantaged and minority communities, exacerbating existing inequities.^{176 177 178 179}

10. Addressing Challenges: Policy and Practice Recommendations

To ensure that neighborhood schools like Ephesus Elementary provide equitable opportunities for all students, policymakers and school leaders must address the underlying drivers of resource disparities and segregation. This includes reforming school funding formulas to reduce reliance on local property taxes and increase state and federal support for high-need schools.^{150 180 146} Targeted investments in facility upgrades, technology, and instructional materials are essential to leveling the playing field.^{181 180}

Efforts to promote integration—such as voluntary desegregation plans, controlled choice policies, and the strategic redrawing of attendance zones—can help ensure that neighborhood schools reflect the diversity of the broader community and provide all students with the benefits of a heterogeneous learning environment.^{156 157 182} Districts can also adopt strategies to expand access to specialized programs and services, such as sharing

resources across schools, offering part-time enrollment in specialized courses, and leveraging technology to provide virtual instruction in advanced subjects. ^{183 180}

Sustained investment in school facilities is essential to providing safe, healthy, and effective learning environments. ¹⁸⁴ Community engagement and advocacy are key to securing the resources needed for facility upgrades and ensuring that investments reflect the priorities and needs of students, families, and staff. ^{185 186}

Preserving Ephesus Elementary is not just an investment in education; it is an investment in the long-term health, resilience, and prosperity of Chapel Hill and its residents.

11. Final Conclusion

Ephesus Elementary School stands as a model neighborhood school, offering exceptional academic outcomes, a diverse and engaged student body, and unparalleled walkability and community integration. Its location within a residential area, direct access to safe walking and biking routes, and close ties to local parks and recreational facilities make it a vital asset to both its students and the surrounding community. The academic and policy literature overwhelmingly supports the benefits of neighborhood schools, particularly those that are walkable and embedded within their communities.

The closure of Ephesus Elementary would not only disrupt the educational experiences of its students but also undermine the town's goals of sustainability, equity, and community vitality. The school's strong performance, diverse enrollment, and high rates of active transportation position it as a critical resource for Chapel Hill, deserving of continued investment and support. As the CHCCS Board of Education weighs its options, the evidence presented here makes a compelling case for keeping Ephesus Elementary open as a cornerstone of the community and a model for neighborhood schools across the region.

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