



## 2. Overview of the School Siting Guidelines

### 2.1. Introduction

School buildings are fundamental components of the educational process, and children spend more time in school than in any other environment except their home. A well-located, thoughtfully designed, soundly built and efficiently operated school enhances the educational process by providing a safe and healthy environment for children, teachers and other staff and provides many opportunities to meet multiple community goals. These voluntary guidelines are intended to assist local school districts, which will be referred to throughout these guidelines as the local education agency (LEA) (see Section 10), and community members in evaluating environmental factors to make the best possible school siting decisions.

The guidelines are intended to be used prior to:

- Making a decision about whether to renovate the existing school, build a new school on the current site or build a new school on a new site;
- Acquisition of land for school facilities;
- Use of legacy property already owned by the LEA;
- Leasing of space in new or existing structures not owned by the LEA for use as a school; and/or
- Major repair, renovation or reuse of existing properties and structures already owned by the LEA for use as a school.

In developing the guidelines, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) focused on four underlying principles for addressing environmental factors in school siting decisions (described in detail in About the School Siting Guidelines):

1. **Safe and healthy school environments are integral components of the education process** (see Section 1.4.1);
2. **The environmental review process should be rigorous, thorough and well-documented and include substantive and ongoing meaningful public involvement** (see Section 1.4.2);
3. **Schools should be located in environments that contribute to the livability, sustainability and public health of neighborhoods and communities** (see Section 1.4.3); and
4. **The school siting process should consider the environmental health and safety of the entire community, including disadvantaged and underserved populations** (see Section 1.4.4).

## 2.2. Overview for Considering Environmental Factors in the School Siting Process

The decision about where to locate a school is fundamentally local in nature, although state, tribal and federal laws and programs often influence the decision-making process in both direct and indirect ways. For example, the presence of environmental contamination and threat of exposure of children and/or staff to unsafe levels of contaminants on school property may trigger the need for state and possibly federal involvement.

These guidelines present recommendations on evaluating the environmental and public health risks and benefits of potential locations as part of the school siting process. Examples of potential environmental and public health risks include onsite contamination, such as radon, volatile organic compounds or petroleum hydrocarbons in soil and ground water, or impacts from nearby sources of pollution, such as industrial facilities and transportation facilities (see [Exhibit 6: Screening Potential Environmental, Public Health and Safety](#)). Some examples of environmental and public health benefits include the location's proximity to residences where future students live (so students would be able to walk or bike to school) and the availability of public transportation to and from the site (see [Exhibit 4: Desirable Environmental Attributes of Candidate Sites](#)).

The siting process is complex and involves many considerations that extend beyond the scope of these guidelines, for example:

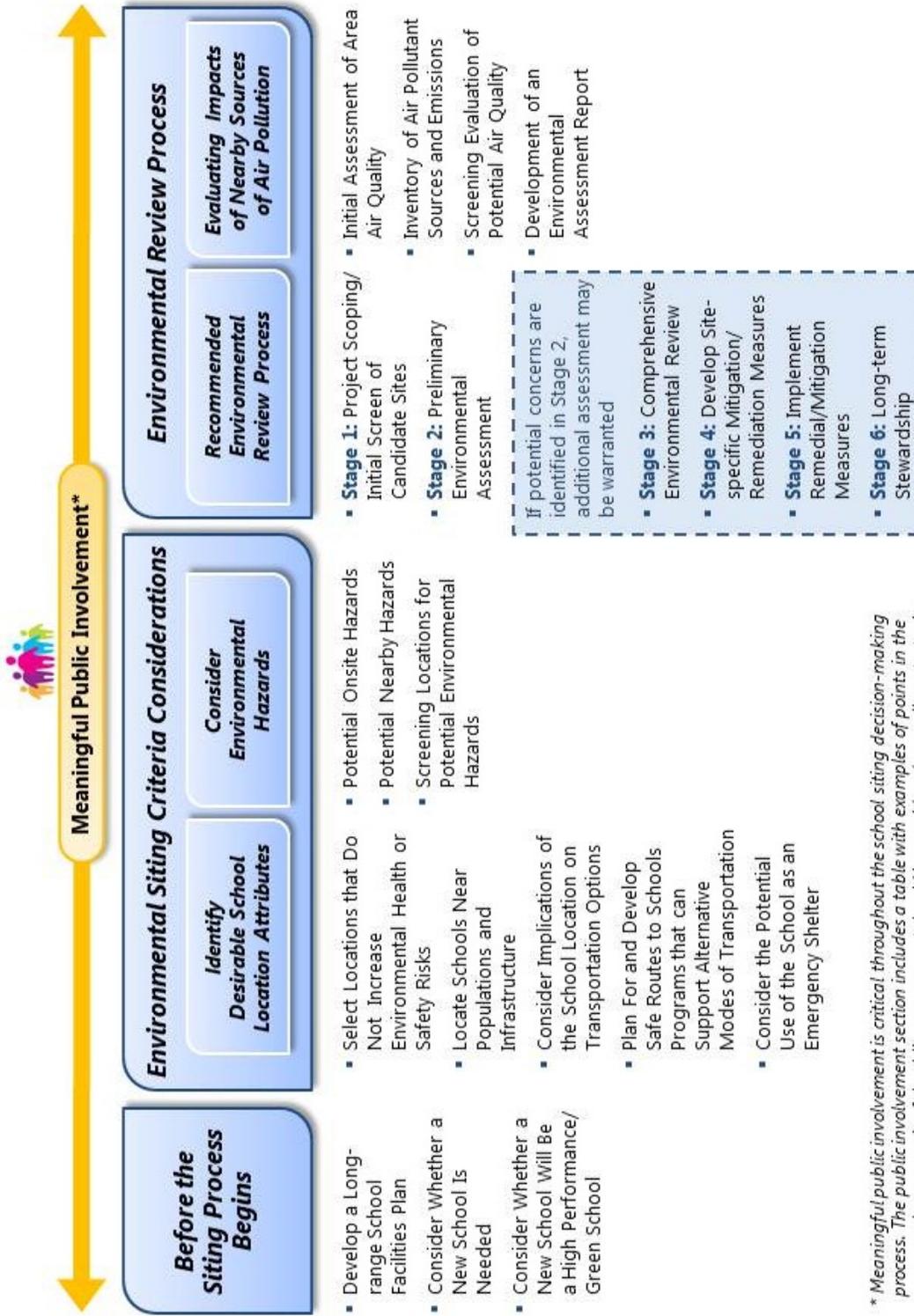
- Educational and extracurricular programs and services;
- Anticipated size and demographics of the student body;
- Needs of individuals with disabilities;
- Location size (acreage and facility space);
- Community partnerships and planned or potential commercial development in the community;
- Cost of land and location preparation;
- Availability of infrastructure (e.g., roads and utilities);
- Requirements that must be met to receive local, state and tribal funding assistance; and
- Economic impact to the community.

While these issues are beyond the scope of the guidelines, some resources related to these other considerations have been provided on the guidelines website. ([www.epa.gov/schools/siting/resources](http://www.epa.gov/schools/siting/resources))

Many LEAs develop [long-range school facilities plans](#) to help determine future facilities needs. These long-range plans provide the context within which the school siting decisions are made. To make informed decisions, the LEA should consider consulting with municipal officials on the community's plans for future land use and capital expenditures (often outlined in a comprehensive plan or similar document) (see Section 4.2.1).

Although the actual process to consider environmental factors in school siting decisions varies from community to community, Exhibit 1 gives a general picture of the issues that are addressed in the guidelines.

Exhibit 1: Overview of the Siting Guidelines



\* Meaningful public involvement is critical throughout the school siting decision-making process. The public involvement section includes a table with examples of points in the process where meaningful public engagement should be considered, as well as strategies for engagement and the types of information that may be presented to, or requested from, the public.

At the beginning and throughout the process of considering environmental factors in the school siting process it is essential for the LEA to involve the public by reaching out to stakeholders in the community, especially those most impacted by the decision to build a new school or renovate an existing school. Stakeholders can include parents, teachers, school personnel, school health council or team members, community and business leaders, and nearby residents. It is important to develop a [communications plan](#) (see Section 3.4) and to identify opportunities for [meaningful public involvement](#) (see Section 3) to ensure the public is engaged throughout the entire school siting process. It is also important to enhance the capacity of disadvantaged and other community members to participate in the process through facilitating access to technical information and assistance and providing access to information for individuals with disabilities and limited English proficiency. To ensure public involvement in consideration of environmental factors in school siting decisions, EPA recommends that the LEA establish a [school siting committee](#) (SSC) (see Section 3.3). This committee should generally consist of representatives of the LEA and its governing body, local government or tribal staff, and representatives from stakeholder groups that can help the LEA identify and evaluate potential school locations (both new and existing).

Before beginning the siting process, an initial decision should be made on whether a [new school facility is needed](#). If the LEA, advised by the SSC, determines that a new facility is needed, the location will play an important role in determining whether the LEA's goals for the facility will be met (see Section 4.2.1).

It is critical for the LEA and the SSC with the community's input to identify environmental factors related to [desirable school location attributes](#) that can be used to prioritize potential new sites (see Section 4.3). Questions that can be asked to determine these characteristics include, but are not limited to:

- What [environmental and public health criteria](#) should be used to evaluate each potential location (see Section 4.4)?
- How can locations be avoided that are either on or in close proximity to land uses that may not

be compatible with schools because of onsite and/or offsite pollution and/or safety hazards?

- How can prospective locations complement and leverage local and regional growth and development plans and strategies?
- What are the desirable cultural or historic preservation attributes that should be considered?
- What environmental justice considerations should be included in the desirable location attributes? ([www.epa.gov/environmental justice](http://www.epa.gov/environmental-justice))
- How will staff, students and community members get to the school?
- What are the potential impacts that the school might have on the environment?
- What attributes will allow the school to serve as an emergency shelter for the community?

Once [potential locations have been identified](#) (see Section 5.5) by the LEA and the SSC with the community's input, the LEA and the SSC should determine which potential locations best meet the stated desired environmental attributes. Questions that can be used to further evaluate potential locations include, but are not limited to:

- Which locations present the least risk of exposure to pollutants originating either onsite or offsite?
- Which locations have opportunities for shared or joint use of school facilities (such as a library, classrooms, physical activity facilities or a health clinic) or community facilities (such as an athletic center or park)?
- Which locations best fit with local, tribal, regional and state development plans?
- Which locations would give the most students additional physical activity opportunities by being able to walk or bike to school?

- Which locations would result in the lowest potential for negative impacts on the environment?

After deciding which locations best meet the desired positive environmental attributes, LEAs should conduct a [preliminary environmental assessment](#) (see Section 5.6) on these locations, which is the first stage in the [environmental review process](#) (see Section 5.3). EPA recommends consulting with [state and tribal](#) (see Section 7) environmental and education agencies during the environmental review process to ensure compliance with requirements and policies and to obtain technical assistance. Examples of topics the LEA, the SSC and the community can consider during the environmental review process include, but are not limited to:

- **The environmental history of each location**, which can include soliciting public input about the past use of each location;
- **Assessments of potential onsite environmental hazards** from contaminated soil and water at the site;
- **Assessments of potential offsite environmental hazards** from nearby sources;
- **The technical feasibility and the costs** associated with preventing or reducing environmental exposures, if present, from a short- and long-term perspective;
- **The environmental impact** of building or renovating a school on the site (e.g., loss to habitat or green space); and
- **Other physical characteristics** such as overall safety and proximity to noise and traffic.

Once the preliminary assessment has been conducted and the assessment reports have been reviewed by the public and the SSC, if no environmental concerns exist, a decision can be made to move forward with the preferred school location.

If potential environmental concerns are found in the preliminary assessment, EPA recommends

### **Cost Considerations for School Siting**

During the siting process, the LEA will need to consider costs related to comparing desirable attributes of candidate sites, performing the assessments recommended in these guidelines and acquiring the site or structure. Some of these cost considerations include:

- Cost of land and location preparation;
- Short- and long-term construction or renovation costs;
- Transportation costs for students and staff; and
- Cost estimates for mitigating or reducing environmental risks and long-term stewardship of remediation measures.

performing a more [comprehensive environmental review](#) for the location found to have potential concerns (see Section 5.7). The comprehensive environmental review should determine if hazardous materials are present or if there is potential for a release of or exposures to a hazardous material or substance that could pose a health threat to children, staff or community members. This review could also assess the need for cleanup based on levels of contamination found and identify the cleanup standards that will be used. Once the comprehensive environmental review is completed and the public has been given the opportunity to comment, the LEA, the SSC and the community should have the information related to the school environment needed to make a final decision about where to locate the school. If there are onsite and/or offsite environmental hazards, site-specific remediation/mitigation measures and a long-term stewardship plan should be developed, reviewed by the public and implemented. ([www.epa.gov/schools/siting/resources](http://www.epa.gov/schools/siting/resources))

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