

NEWS RELEASE

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Where Will Your Child Go to School in the Year 2016? NC State Researchers Aid New School Plans

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

When it comes to school growth, we depend on our school system leaders to have the answers concerning where new schools should be built and how the district should be divided. Now administrators can turn to North Carolina State University to help them find the answers.

NC State's Operations Research and Education Laboratory (OR/Ed.), housed in the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE), has developed the Integrated Planning for School and Community planning system for public schools. This scientific planning process helps to determine the best locations to build new schools and how district lines should be drawn in order to balance the student body at each school. During the last 15 years, the Lab has provided statistical data and research to aid more than 30 school districts across North Carolina.

"School system leaders often have a pretty good idea about what's going on in their system as a whole, but they really don't know how to pinpoint areas of growth unless they see subdivisions going up and they say, 'We've got to do something,' and then it's too late," says Michael Miller, OR/Ed program manager.

There is more to school planning than merely creating enough buildings to hold students. District leaders are also concerned with achieving balance so that the school is a reflection of the community as a whole. Miller says balance is often achieved by taking students from one part of a district to another and people are very sensitive to that. So the OR/Ed. Lab applies science to what can be an emotional and controversial process.

That is really the lab's biggest strength, Miller says. "It's not about trying to predict how many children your county will have in the future, although that's important. It's really about how can you start the process of redistricting and finding new school locations in a scientific way that is driven by data and not by opinion."

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The first step in the Integrated Planning for School and Community process is to conduct systemwide forecasting by utilizing a district's history and enrollment growth to project what the trends will be for the next 10 years. Then a land-use infrastructure study is conducted to determine the amount of projected growth in the county during the next 10 years. The next component uses Geographic Information System (GIS) surveys of the number of students in existing subdivisions to project the student-generation potential for any new planned subdivisions. That figure helps researchers predict what the district can expect when those new subdivisions are complete. The result is a document called an out-of-capacity worksheet, which includes a projection of current students per building and how many more students to expect over the next 10 years. The school board can then use the report to decide where to build new schools.

School Location Optimization takes information about where the school is needed, based on projected community growth, and determines the best location. Attendance boundaries are then developed to ensure that there is no overcrowding and that the district achieves any kind of balance it needs. This is a delicate process, because districts should be balanced not only by capacity, but also by things such as the number of free and reduced lunch students or the number of students that have low or high academic standing. The OR/Ed. Lab's data provides the best scenarios for balancing student populations while ensuring that the school represents the community as a whole.

Miller says that school district leaders must focus farther out than a year and plan for five or 10 years in the future. "The OR/Ed. Lab's research is critically important because it gives school leaders the tools to think that far ahead and provides them with a scientific way to address the growth issues that all our school districts are facing," Miller says.

For more information about the Operations Research Education Lab, visit www.itre.ncsu.edu/PT/ORED/index.html or to download a detailed brochure explaining the Integrated Planning for School and Community process, visit www.itre.ncsu.edu/PT/ORED/Integrated.html.