Transportation and Schools in Opportunity Areas

Choosing a Location Near Transit Does Not Require a Sacrifice on School Quality

Few people would argue with these propositions: Quality education for children is good for its own sake and an important factor in determining a child’s life long success. Every child deserves a quality education.

Yet in Cook County, many household have the mistaken perception that they must give up access to transit in a tradeoff with school quality. What they require is quality information to make reasoned decision, and the eTOD calculator can help.

To obtain equity in education for their children, moderate and lower income families in Cook County commonly follow one or more of three basic strategies:

• Move into high performing school districts, often at great financial sacrifice
• Send children to better schools outside of their neighborhood
• Spend as much quality time with their children as possible, preparing them to engage in learning

The viability of each of these strategies is powerfully impacted by the transportation options available in the neighborhood where the family lives.

When a family seeks to live in a community with high housing costs for the sake of good schools, its ability to make this choice may depend on available transportation options. Transportation is the second highest expense of most US households, and the largest component of transportation costs is usually car ownership. The cost of owning and operating a single vehicle in Cook County exceeds $10,000 per year. So a family that can use public transportation, walk, or bike to a parent’s job, a child’s school, and frequently used amenities, may be able to live well with one car or no car at all, and use their transportation savings to reside in a community with higher housing costs and good schools.

If parents choose to send a child out of the neighborhood to a better school, it is important to consider impact of those daily trips on a child’s time, energy, and readiness to learn. Research in Cook County and other regions demonstrates that long student commutes affect educational outcomes for the worse. If a child’s travel to school can be made short and convenient with walkable trips or public transit, a family may preserve its income and improve the child’s education.

While caring parents try to spend quality time with their children, providing them with emotional comfort and stimulating their readiness to learn, these efforts can be undermined by long commute times for parents. A study by the University of Michigan that monitored the impact of long commutes on family time for low-income families found that, when parents were absent, their kids more frequently exhibited less positive behavior at schools than their peers.

Using data from CNT’s Social Impact Calculator, several Cook County examples illustrate the impact that variations in transportation services can have on educational opportunities. Two elementary schools in northern Cook County -- Pleasant Ridge in Glenview and Shabonee School in Northbrook -- score 9 out of 10 on the GreatSchools.org rating system. But as the eTOD Calculator
demonstrates, the Glenview location offers more options for getting around. At Glenview Road in Pleasant Ridge, a household could use Metra or 3 Pace lines to get to 277,299 jobs within 30 minutes. The typical resident would drive 14,919 miles per year. Among those who take transit, 70% of riders have commutes under an hour.

At a second location in the Shabonee district, at the intersection of Landwehr Road and Walters Avenue, a household must walk nearly a mile to reach a bus line. Among those who manage to take transit in this neighborhood, 63% commute at least 60 minutes to their job. And a resident would spend 19,434 miles behind the wheel to reach jobs and critical amenities, 30% more than at the Glenview location. Clearly, a family would have a better chance of reducing transportation costs while making quality time between parents and children if they lived at the Pleasant Ridge address rather than at Landwehr and Walters.

Notably no Low-Income Housing Tax Credit project exists in either neighborhood. All too often, LIHTC and other funding programs underwrite units in locations in other parts of the region with underperforming schools and lack of proximity to jobs. For example, in South Chicago Heights in southern Cook County, a LIHTC building at 2601 Commercial Avenue sits along just one bus line, Route 358 (Torrence), which runs every half hour on weekdays, once an hour on Saturdays, and does not run on Sunday. It can take riders up to 30 minutes just to make a rail connection to the South Shore at Hegewisch or a regional bus connection in Chicago Heights. Few in the Village use its limited transit, but of those that do, 55% of transit riders and 100% of bus riders spend more than an hour to reach a job. With few amenities within walking distance, this development leaves low income households and their children isolated from good schools, quality transportation, and family-friendly amenities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glenview Road</th>
<th>Landwehr Rd / Walters Ave</th>
<th>2601 Commercial Avenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2601 Commercial Avenue South Chicago Heights, IL</td>
<td>277,219 jobs within a 30 minute transit commute</td>
<td>Walking distance to 1 bus line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenview, IL</td>
<td>30% of transit commuters in the neighborhood commute for an hour or longer</td>
<td>No jobs accessible within a 30 minute commute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Walking distance to 3 transit lines</td>
<td>• No transit line within walking distance</td>
<td>• 55% of transit commuters in the neighborhood travel for an hour or longer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1 grocery store, 14 restaurants, 1 library, 3 parks within walking distance</td>
<td>• No jobs accessible within a 30 minute commute</td>
<td>• 1 grocery store, 1 park</td>
</tr>
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<td>• 1 library, 1 park</td>
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<td>within walking distance</td>
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The eTOD Calculator can help a family, a developer, or a community choose affordable housing locations that offer high quality education institutions and access to transportation and amenities. When evaluating a site, scroll down through the columns on the left-hand side. Under the "Developer Resources" category and "What's Nearby" subcategory, a user can opt to select
amenities within a radius of the potential development, including schools. It is also possible to visualize these on the map view. A user may use this option to find two locations with access to good elementary or high schools and score them against one another on their job access, transit quality, or other factors.

School quality and transportation choice both affect access to opportunity for moderate and low-income households. When both these factors are fully considered, parents can reach jobs and amenities with low transportation costs, children can thrive in the classroom, and everybody can spend time together. The Chicago region can make this the reality of a growing number of families by locating more eTOD projects in locations with good educational facilities, walkability, and high quality public transportation.