Abandoned School Buildings in Rural Illinois and Their Conversions

by Karin A. Spader

In June 2000, the National Trust for Historic Preservation included neighborhood schools in its list of America’s Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places (Beaumont and Pianca 2000), noting how many small neighborhood schools were closing. These closings occur for many reasons. In places where the school-age population is growing, larger school facilities replace schools that are now too small. In rural areas, however, it is more likely a steady decline in enrollment that has forced districts to consolidate and close one, or more, school buildings still in usable condition.

Other reasons for closure can include lack of money for needed repairs and pressures to build new, rather than renovate, old facilities, as well as a lack of public support for preserving existing school buildings (Beaumont and Pianca 2000). While these issues partly explain school closings, they do not indicate what happens to abandoned buildings, and, because these buildings can be either an asset or an eyesore in small towns, finding suitable and productive uses is an important issue for community leaders.

In 1998, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs studied the conversion and adaptive use of closed school buildings in rural Illinois (Liebenstein 1998). That project surveyed 29 Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) and identified 25 closed buildings, with 19 of the 25 converted to other uses. Nine examples of reuse were then summarized, including the value of the buildings, examples of appropriate uses, procedures used by developers in purchasing the buildings, and brief descriptions of the conversion process.

The current report begins by reviewing the literature regarding the benefits of revitalizing abandoned school buildings followed by a summary of findings from a survey of administrators involved in recent building closures. Examples of four school buildings successfully converted to new uses are provided. The hope is to illustrate options that can be explored in communities before a closed school building is abandoned and reaches sufficient deterioration to no longer have a productive use.

The International City/County Management Association (2002) states that the rehabilitation of abandoned buildings can promote unique opportunities in managing growth in a community. This is especially true when population increases have caused a decline in the available land to develop. Rehabbing or reusing abandoned properties, especially those with access to necessary infrastructure, can mean lower development costs and enable the property to be brought into productive use more quickly.

Renovated abandoned school buildings can serve as affordable housing, business establishments, or community centers, to name only a few possibilities. Whatever use is pursued, the renovation process always involves participation by many agencies in a community. Financial institutions are required to offer low-interest loans for rehabilitation of vacant properties used for low- and moderate-income housing (ICMA 2002). Examples include federal low-income housing tax credits, federal tax credits for historic preservation, and state and federal loans.

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for rehabilitation. Local governments can also allocate a portion of their federal housing funds for rehabilitation.

City governments can modify zoning and building regulatory codes to encourage the rehabilitation of abandoned buildings. Beyond financial assistance, local governments can provide technical assistance to property owners and landlords regarding the logistics of vacant property revitalization and the codes or ordinances that apply in renovating an abandoned building.

The Illinois State Board of Education (2005) school district reorganization report identified 15 counties where schools had been either consolidated or deactivated between 2000 and 2005. These 15 counties included 27 schools in 14 Regional Offices of Education across Illinois. In 2006, IIRA sent a mail questionnaire to 14 ROEs with school reorganizations to determine whether school buildings had been vacated and were redeveloped into new uses. All 14 ROEs responded. The questionnaire included the following questions:

- Since 2000, what has been the general pattern of student enrollment in the region (decreased less than 10 percent, decreased 10 to 25 percent, increased less than 10 percent, etc.)?
- Why were the schools reorganized (e.g., not enough students, not enough money in the district, physical/structural problems)?
- Have the schools been sold since then and to whom (e.g., private developer, public agency, etc.)?
- How have the buildings been reused (e.g., apartments, antique malls, shopping center, community center, etc.)?

Survey responses are summarized below followed by a more detailed examination of several abandoned school buildings that have been renovated recently.

Within the ROEs surveyed, a total of 27 schools had been involved in the reorganizations. Four schools were deactivated with students transferred to different districts, and 23 schools were consolidated to form new districts (in one case, three schools consolidated into a new district). Three respondents from the deactivated schools reported that there were an insufficient number of students to remain open and that the financial situation triggered the deactivations. Two respondents reported physical or structural problems, and two respondents reported other causes.

Overall, the main reason reported for reorganizations were an insufficient number of students \((n = 19)\) or insufficient funding in the district \((n = 18)\), but some districts reported both reasons. Only three schools were reorganized because of physical and/or structural problems with the building. Five other schools reorganized for other reasons—for example, offering a broader curriculum, improved finances, and efficiency considerations.

A large majority \((n = 23)\) of school buildings that were closed because of reorganizations have not been sold and are still owned by the district. One building, however, was sold to a public agency and two were sold to private developers. Regardless of ownership, most \((n = 24)\) of the buildings have not been converted to new uses. For example, of the four deactivated schools, two are still used by the school district as office space, one building is a community center, and one has been condemned.

Of the school buildings reorganized due to consolidation, two currently house businesses; one is an elementary school district office; and 20 are still being used as school buildings. Thus, of the 27 buildings affected by reorganization, only one building has been condemned and the remaining 26 buildings are either still being used by the school district as office space or attendance centers, and three of the buildings have been converted into new uses.

An insufficient number of students is not a major issue in the school closings, with six of the 12 schools reporting decreases of less than 10 percent (see Table 1).

Table 1. General Pattern of Student Population Since 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decreased less than 10%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased 10%-25%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased less than 10%</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased 10%-25%</td>
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Source: IIRA survey of Regional Offices of Education 2006
Based on survey responses, a majority of the school buildings were not sold after they were vacated and, for the most part, continue to house educational services. The exact reason for the known vacancies is not clear, however, since respondents did not indicate general physical and/or structural problems. The previous literature indicates that many developers want to build rather than renovate an existing building unless incentives are provided (Yeater 2004). Renovating a former school building may be more costly, depending on intended use. Nevertheless, several examples exist where clever ideas have been tried in vacant school buildings and these will be discussed next.

A prime example of a revitalized school building is the Pearce Community Center (PCC) in Chillicothe, Illinois. The PCC, funded by the Pearce Foundation, a not-for-profit organization, is a multi-use recreational facility with amenities such as aerobics and weight training, two full-size gyms (one with an indoor track), a swimming pool, a computer lab, and a banquet room. The PCC relies heavily on volunteer support and caters to youth with programs such as swimming lessons, preschool classes, and youth sports leagues. It also provides for senior citizens with activities like line dancing, cards, and shuffleboard (for more information, see [www.pearcecc.com](http://www.pearcecc.com)). Large-scale examples like the Pearce Community Center may be more common in larger communities because there may be more people available to volunteer during the conversion process as well as to provide continued assistance to keep the building functioning. The availability of funds may also be more prevalent in more populated locations, which may be another reason that conversion endeavors such as this are not common in rural Illinois. Still, there are numerous examples of converted school buildings that do exist in rural Illinois; the remainder of this report will provide specific information on the conversion process and the status of multiple abandoned school buildings in west-central Illinois.

In January 2005, two local residents purchased the former Farmington High School building after it closed when the school district built a replacement high school. The buyers already owned commercial properties, and they found the abandoned school while working with a realtor on another property. Both own properties, but the Old School Center is their first joint venture. Currently, they lease space in the building which provides revenues to fund further construction efforts.

Plans for the building are extensive. While the entire building is not currently fully functional, several sections are already in use. First, the gym has been maintained complete with bleachers, basketball hoops, and a volleyball net for use by community groups.

The second floor has a game room equipped with two pool tables, a ping pong table, a foosball table, miscellaneous board games, and a television. Future plans include adding nostalgic arcade games, such as *Pac-man* set on free play. A classroom on the third floor was converted into a theatre. The screen measures 16-feet diagonally, and risers were installed to create a theatre setting fitted with multiple couches and chairs. Finally, the principal’s office has been converted into a small apartment. For the time being, it is a place where someone can stay for an overnight function, but in the future it will house a live-in manager to oversee the building and events.

The south wing of the school is currently occupied by several tenants. Headstart, a federally funded preschool program, is one tenant. While Headstart does not necessarily complement other uses of the Old School Center, it does affect which other businesses can rent space. Because Headstart is federally funded, some businesses may not be eligible for occupancy in close proximity.
In May 2005, two residents purchased the former Logan grade school in Hanna City, Illinois. The building was closed when a school was built to consolidate several districts. Initially, the Hanna City Village Board purchased the building with plans of turning it over to the park district. One of the current owners served on the park district board when the building was closed. The building was then purchased by a church group with plans to make it an antique mall. The purchase price was $50,000 with another $120,000 for renovation. Fortunately, the building was in excellent condition and met codes and parking needs.

South Eden Village is currently fully functioning as a gift, furniture, and antique mall with reasonable rental rates. The building was then purchased with a Small Business Administration loan with plans to make it an antique mall. Plans fell through and the building was again put up for bid. Fortunately, the building was in excellent condition and met codes and parking needs. Renting these sections of the building is important to the operations of the entire building, especially to the conversion process because it provides revenues to complete the plans.

Initially, the owners expected the entire conversion project to take from two to five years, but the popularity of the project forced them to accelerate their plans. The goal is to target large groups, such as church groups, large family functions, school groups, or other community groups, for events like camps, reunions, or other large recreational purposes. A recent site visit disclosed an honors program from a local high school that had assembled nearly 120 students for an outing. The students could use the gym or the game room and a movie was playing in the theatre.

Other groups have expressed interest in using the building, in its current status, for functions. For example, a church group that holds a summer camp for approximately 100 senior high boys recently lost access to campgrounds that were used in the past. They have expressed interest in using the Old School Center instead. This group also has held camps for senior high girls and junior high students and may be interested in using the Center for these functions. The interest expressed accelerated the completion schedule substantially with a revised completion date of summer 2007.

Future plans for the building include overnight accommodations. Total overnight occupancy could be as many as 200 persons. Seven “hotel suites” will be equipped with a living area, a kitchenette, a bedroom and a full bathroom. Two large, high-capacity “dorm rooms” complete with bunk beds are also planned. These dorm rooms will have attached communal bathrooms with multiple showers, sinks, and toilets.

In addition, two large classrooms are being divided into three “cabins” each or six “cabin” areas that will be used for summer camps and other such groups. Plans also include a large common area to be used for group events or as a cafeteria for a large group. All rooms will retain chalkboards to make them “kid friendly” as possible. Ideas for a small indoor water park in the former auditorium were also mentioned along with a zero-entry pool for kids and hot tubs for adults.

The entire conversion process is being undertaken during the owners’ “spare time.” They run an electrical contracting business and will rely on “handymen” to help them. For the most part, the project will rely on their efforts. High-cost obstacles encountered include installing elevators to reach the second and third floors and installing bathrooms. Since so many people and groups have expressed an interest in renting the OSC, the owners are trying to complete the project quickly. In the meantime, the building already is used regularly.

With over 70,000 square feet under the roof, the OSC offers a major location for large groups to hold recreational events. The main goal of the project, according to the owners, is to “see people have fun . . . and have fun using [the OSC]!” For more information about the Old School Center, call 309/697-9450.

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South Eden Village is currently fully functioning as a gift, furniture, and antique mall with reasonable rental rates. Woodgyard Fence, a floral shop, specializes in fresh and silk flowers. A lunch buffet is available from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM daily and for Sunday brunch. Bearly Used Treasures sells new, used, and quality refinished antique furniture; Linda's Loft has unusual primitives, antiques, and unique gifts. The Wooden Fence, a floral shop, specializes in fresh and silk arrangements as well as home décor and accessories. The Totally Christmas Shop is open from October through December. An open air flea market is held on the first weekend of each month from May through October.

The owners also had the property zoned so that they could live in the building. The section containing their residence is currently under construction. The owners feel it is important to have someone there at all times to watch over
the building. One of the owners is a freelance illustrator who works from home. Individuals who rent spaces are also required to volunteer time working at the site which enables lower labor costs.

Since the building was in good condition at the time of purchase, the conversion process was fairly simple. One family member completed the necessary wiring while the owners finished other required construction on their own. They replaced the boiler system with a heating and cooling system. The former gym now houses the furniture shop, although one basketball hoop remains to remind observant shoppers of an earlier facility use. The old classrooms have booths that are leased to tenants who sell a variety of knick-knacks and handmade arts and crafts. The whole conversion process went quickly. They purchased the building in May 2005 and opened four and a half months later on September 15, 2005.

The main obstacle now is marketing to potential customers even though the building is located only 12 minutes from Peoria. Permanent signage is not permitted on the highway leading to Hanna City, so the business must rely on small temporary signs and on word-of-mouth marketing from those who visit. Visitors to South Eden Village are asked to tell others about the mall and where it is located. In the future, the owners plan to expand the restaurant area and have it open for dinner. The conversion process and the results so far have gone well.

In May 2006, the former Mt. Carroll school building was sold. The building previously housed all grades from elementary through high school but was closed when a replacement high school was built. The building was auctioned to the public and was purchased for $2,500. The building is being renovated without external funding and now houses several businesses. Tenants are waiting to move in, but there is room for additional tenants and plans for the building are still developing.

The decision to convert the building into multiple businesses was economically motivated. It was noted during a telephone interview with the owner that Mt. Carroll needed additional jobs. It was felt that by converting the former school building into several new businesses, employment would be generated. He also said that by drawing more businesses and jobs to the area, the whole town would benefit. Currently, there is a Tae Kwan Do class in one section of the building. Another tenant, a monogramming company, is waiting to move in and will use three former classrooms or approximately 3,000 square feet.

While the total investment in the conversion process to this point is not known, there are expected payoffs in the future. Because of the low purchase price, the converted building is expected to be paid off within two years from the completion date. Since the building was in excellent condition at the time of purchase, the conversion process has been relatively uncomplicated with no major obstacles during the renovation.

The conversion process has been a positive experience for the owner, and he said that he “... would not have done anything differently.” The main goal is to bring more jobs to the area by bringing in businesses. He is also interested in meeting the needs of the community, and some residents have expressed an interest in being able to walk through the building for exercise purposes. For more information call 815/244-4400.
In 2001, the Dallas City High School was deactivated because of consolidation with the Nauvoo-Colusa School District. This example differs from the previous examples because there was no formal conversion process, but the building still provides an excellent example of an abandoned school building being reused. Following the deactivation of the high school, the school district retained ownership of the building and transformed it into the Great River Community Center.

Currently, the Great River Community Center houses the Lions Club, a boxing club, and a federally funded after-school program. The Lions Club uses the building for meetings, and the boxing club has a gym and utilizes the fitness center in the building. Staff from the Dallas City School also occasionally use the fitness center. For a while, the building was a community center, but that function recently was discontinued because of insufficient volunteer help to keep it going.

Currently, the most significant program in the building is the after-school program. The after-school program is available for all students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. This differs from after-school programs in other schools because others often only allow students with failing grades to come to the program. This program is federally funded with a 21st Century Grant from the No Child Left Behind Act, which pays the staff and maintenance that the building needs. The grant is for five years; however, every school must reapply each year, though renewal is usually guaranteed as long as all the services in the application are actually offered. For example, one stipulation is an emphasis on academics, so the program must focus on increasing the grades of students who are failing. Everyday, from 4:30 to 6:00 PM, students come to the center and are allowed to play in the old gym, work on art projects in the art room, or sit in the library and work on homework. Students with failing grades are required to stay in the library and work on homework until their grades improve. The school librarian is there to help students find books or to help them with homework. The art room is staffed by the daytime art teacher, and the gym is also staffed by a teacher. A playroom for younger children is staffed by a non-faculty person. The coordinator of the after-school program reported that two high school students also help with the program.

The Dallas City building is a large, two-story structure with a portion of the building resembling an old castle with towers. The castle section is closed due to structural problems, and the second story of the remainder of the building is also out of bounds for the after-school program. The rest of the building meets code and is available for use.

Recently, the school district has had a great deal of difficulty keeping the building operational. The boiler system is old and continues to have problems, and the gymnasium is sunken in and needs to be renovated to make it handicap accessible. Regardless of the difficulty of upkeep, many residents want to see the gym remain open, and the superintendent wants to use it for the after-school program. For more information about the center, call 217/852-3201.

In 1990, the Smithfield School District consolidated with the Cuba School District and the former Smithfield High School building was closed. Cass Township agreed to purchase the building if a local couple would agree to manage the venture. This local couple agreed, and the building was bought for one dollar in June of 1991. Quickly, the managers and many volunteers worked together to prepare the building for the first event: the Spoon River Drive in October of that same year.
The Spoon River Drive is a scenic drive through Fulton County with multiple historical stops along the way (for more information, see the annual event's website: www.spoonriverdrive.org). The Red Brick School provides a place for thousands of tourists to sit down and enjoy a chicken noodle dinner and hot apple dumplings. Arts and crafts vendors set up tables in the many classrooms throughout the building, and the upstairs houses a museum filled with items donated or lent by community residents.

Prior to purchasing the building, the school had been closed for one year, so a considerable amount of cleaning and painting had to be done before the opening events. Fortunately, vendors and individuals interested in keeping the building open as a community center volunteered their time to clean and paint the rooms as well as to build a large, fully functional kitchen. Although most rooms were painted, several rooms and hallways required paneling due to the uneven heating of the building in the winter, which causes the plaster to crack, peel, and break. New windows were installed as well as a new roof. The money for maintenance and renovations was obtained from selling the chicken noodle dinners during Spoon River Drive as well as through donations from individuals in the community. For more information about the Red Brick School, call 309/783-3283.

The revitalization of abandoned school buildings can offer many benefits to communities. This report described just a few examples of how school buildings have been converted into new uses in recent years. As history shows, it is important to revitalize vacated properties, and financial incentives are available (ICMA 2002). As more and more rural school districts are reorganized, leaving vacant school buildings, it is important to be aware of potential alternatives for maintaining these buildings for productive use.

Neighborhood schools are now few and far between (Beaumont & Pianca 2000). Most students will probably attend more centralized and larger schools. Surveys in this project indicate that some school buildings remain empty. In other cases, however, the buildings are being reused; the Old School Center, South Eden Village, Mt. Carroll Grade School, the Great River Community Center, and the Red Brick School are examples of successful conversions of former school buildings in rural Illinois. With increased knowledge of potential alternatives and financial assistance, more abandoned schools may be reused in ways that not only remove an eyesore but also benefit the community at large.

References


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*The Rural Research Report is a series published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs to provide brief updates on research projects conducted by the Institute. Rural Research Reports are peer-reviewed and distributed to public officials, libraries, and professional associations involved with specific policy issues.*