

## From Good to Green

*As you move toward a green schools program, here are some tips for ensuring your efforts will be sustainable—and supported by your community—for the long run.*

**Y**our district has made a commitment to green its schools. Did the board pass a green resolution? Did you form a sustainability task force that is ready to work? Are you itching to move forward, excited to plant the elementary school's organic garden or interested in partnering with local businesses to raise money for the high school's solar panels?

Before you dive headfirst into those new recycling bins, you need a clear vision for getting from good to green. You wouldn't start a road trip without consulting a map and plotting your route, would you?

Mapping out your district's green vision and sharing it with your community is an important step in solidifying a sustainability strategy, growing consensus, and ensuring ongoing support. As a board member or administrator, you can set your district on a sure path to greener schools. As the driver of this process, you also should keep all involved parties and partners moving in the right direction.

Districts that are leaders in the green school movement have several common traits. They:

- Pass green resolutions or action items and engage a diverse group of decisionmakers in developing a green vision.

- Build in-house expertise, beginning with an individual appointed to spearhead sustainability initiatives.

- Make a public commitment to healthy, high-performance schools.

### Green guidelines

Your district's green vision can be articulated in many ways—with a strategic plan for sustainability, a healthy, high-performance mission statement, or green guidelines. Determine the optimal format and establish a development timeline.

To set meaningful and attainable goals, determine what “green” or “sustainability” means to your staff and community. What positive outcomes would they like to see? Where should you focus your attention? Teachers might want to tie energy-saving programs to the curriculum, while parents may be more focused on indoor air quality improvements to reduce the incidence of asthma. Perhaps the board is interested in pursuing LEED certification for all new construction, but the head of facilities is unsure.

Most districts choose to focus on three priorities: occupant health, student performance, and financial savings. No one objects to a healthy, high-performing student, but plenty of people still believe going green is a luxury you can't afford. To be successful, you must assure the community that your sustainability efforts will result in savings for the district. Make it known that

new programs and improvements will put money back into the classrooms.

Sustainability is a journey, not a single moment in time. When developing green guidelines, take stock of proactive initiatives already in place and identify incremental and achievable steps toward a greener district.

Dave Hill, executive director of facilities and operations for Kansas' Blue Valley School District, understood this when he led the effort to create “Guiding Principles and Sustainable Strategies” for the district's 31 buildings. The plan detailed the goals of green initiatives already under way and set plans for raising the bar over time. Fifteen years later, these principles continue to drive district decisions and motivate the school board to support increasingly ambitious green goals.

### You asked for it

As you know, widespread participation builds widespread support. Consider hosting a public meeting, or “charrette,” to engage community members and solicit new ideas. The term charrette is commonly used by the green building community to describe a pre-project gathering that invites a diverse group of people to contribute to the conversation, identify priorities, and set goals.

Invite community members to brainstorm green strategies that will conserve resources and money, boost occupant productivity, and support the well-being of teachers, students, and staff.

A charrette is an excellent opportunity to identify new champions who are willing to contribute much-needed expertise, time, and resources as you move forward. Reach out to knowledgeable, insightful participants and ask if they are

interested in volunteering to provide ongoing support. Consider assembling this smaller group of informed people to review and comment on future drafts of district sustainability plans.

Your local U.S. Green Building Council (USBGC) chapter includes community members who are well versed in green buildings and sustainable development. Chapter volunteers are armed and ready with the knowledge and expertise your district needs. With green schools committees in all 78 chapters, this national network of nearly 1,000 advocates is dedicated to educating communities about the benefits of green schools.

With the mayor's support and assistance, the USGBC chapter in Anchorage, Alaska, formed a steering committee to discuss sustainability goals for the community. The group—working with the municipal planning department, the school district, community council, assembly members, and local builders—developed a sustainable building initiative that included a green building ordinance requiring all new municipal buildings and new schools to be LEED-certified. The chapter's green schools committee continues to support the Anchorage School District in the implementation of its sustainability program.

Reach out to your local USGBC chapter for help to get your green initiatives rolling.

### No "I" in team

You need a green team to implement the district's vision. This team should be made up of representatives from relevant departments—facilities, dining services, transportation, procurement, curriculum, health and safety, and so on. Because sustainability touches upon the work of all of these departments, an integrated team and collaborative approach are necessary.

Ideally, you should assemble this team before solidifying a mission statement or plan. Early involvement will encourage active participation and

buy-in across departments, and the team's first assignment could be to draft the district's green guidelines.

Your team needs a leader—someone accountable for seeing the creation of green guidelines from beginning to end. Identify someone to lead the team's efforts and ensure that they have the capacity and training they need to take on this task.

Many districts have grown sustainability programs out of facilities departments, as many improvements can be addressed by focusing on how schools are built and operated. Your facilities staff knows your buildings better than anyone. They know which schools are scheduled for retrofits and renovations, and they are intimately familiar with building performance issues—from inactive HVAC systems to overactive sprinklers.

As you well know, facilities managers can recite from memory a long list of problems with district buildings. Also, these managers are best equipped to help you identify opportunities to improve maintenance practices, upgrade inefficient systems, and implement sustainable purchasing. Inviting input and gaining the facilities department's support helps your green team set realistic standards and expectations for the design, construction, operations, and maintenance of buildings.

### Unexpected champions

As you assemble the team, think about including participants who aren't on the district payroll. Students know what they need to make the most of their time in the classroom, and how they will be most comfortable and productive. Including students in establishing your green guidelines will introduce you to a valuable vantage point. Invite them to develop a "wish list" of what they want to see in their schools; you likely will find them ahead of the green curve.

Creating green guidelines takes a lot of work. Celebrate with your community by posting your document on the district's

## Editor's note:

This is the second in a series of articles provided by the U.S. Green Building Council on the role school boards and administrators can take in moving toward environmentally friendly, sustainable green schools. For previous articles, go to [www.asbj.com](http://www.asbj.com).

website, publicizing it in newsletters and issuing a press release. In 2000, Colorado's Poudre School District published the first edition of its sustainable design guidelines, which included an introduction written by the current superintendent. Over time, the district has added more content to its website that details Poudre's "Ethic of Sustainability" and catalogues recent green awards, press releases, and articles.

As sustainability and green building movements advance, more efficient systems, technologies, and products become available and best practices evolve. The district's goals and vision also will shift over time. Revise your green guidelines periodically to accurately reflect the successful advancement of sustainability initiatives and the district's future needs.

Five years after releasing sustainable design guidelines, Poudre updated them, with the green team seeking recommendations for improvements from designers, general contractors, subconsultants, building occupants, peer organizations, and local, state, and national experts.

Whether you're reevaluating cleaning products, vending machine contracts, transportation providers, or window replacement plans, the decisions you make should be tied back to your green vision. Consistently aligning everyday choices to your community's established green standards will help you stay the course and advance your goals for sustainability.

Visit [www.greenschoolbuildings.org/ASBJ](http://www.greenschoolbuildings.org/ASBJ) to access tools, case studies of successful projects, and research or to contact your local green schools committee. ■

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