

Make Green Your Legacy

What you can do to make an impact on your environment—and your students

Rachel Gutter

Make no mistake—green is everywhere. A basic Internet search for the phrase “go green” returns links to more than 10 million websites, including sites for government agencies, nonprofit organizations, product manufacturers, and news outlets. International corporations, local business owners, celebrities, and political leaders are going green, saturating the media and the marketplace with messages about sustainability and environmental stewardship.

We hear many stories of true impact, while others are better characterized as “green washing.” As consumers, educators, and leaders, our job is to know the difference.

The proliferation of green is for a very good reason, even if some claims are overstated. In the midst of an economic crisis, and on the brink of an environmental one, we are armed with a comprehensive understanding of the impact our actions have on the world in which we live and the ways in which we can do better.

Buildings in the U.S. are responsible for 39 percent of CO² emissions, 40 percent of energy consumption, 13 percent of water consumption, and 15 percent of gross domestic product per year, making green building a source of significant economic and environmental opportunity. Greater building efficiency can meet 85 percent of future U.S. demand for energy, and a national commitment to green building has the potential to generate 2.5 million American jobs.

More important, greening our homes, our schools, and our lifestyles will improve our health and our children’s health. As a school leader, you should encourage your district to rethink the way your schools are

designed, built, and operated.

Make green your legacy.

HOW TO START

As a school board member or other school leader, you can do a number of things to set your district on the path to green. But where do you begin?

Today, the case for greening our schools could not be stronger. The connections between a school facility and student health and performance are well-established. Studies show that improving indoor air quality, lighting, thermal comfort, and acoustics can boost student achievement.

At West Brazos Junior High School, a LEED-certified facility in Brazoria, Texas, teachers and students are flourishing in their high-performance classrooms that have plenty of daylighting. During the first year in the new building, standardized test scores in math, reading, and social studies went up by 4, 5, and 7 percent respectively. Teachers report happier students and fewer discipline problems.

Going green also is an opportunity to conserve precious resources and operational dollars. A typical green school can reduce

energy and water consumption by as much as 40 percent and save \$100,000 a year, on average, in direct operating expenses.

As a board member, you can start your district on the path by proposing a green school resolution. This will create a ripple effect throughout your community. The resolution can address requirements for new construction projects, retrofits, or districtwide operations and maintenance. The LEED green building certification program has been adopted by hundreds of schools and districts throughout the country as a leadership standard for new and existing facilities. Resolutions also can target more specific district operational policies, such as green cleaning, integrated pest management, recycling, or energy management.

Boards across the country have passed green schools resolutions. New Mexico’s Rio Rancho Public Schools has committed to green across the district’s construction and operations policies. Working hand-in-hand with the head of the facilities department, the school board passed an action item that instructs all new construction projects to be LEED certified.

As the fastest-growing district in the state, Rio Rancho jumped at the chance to build green while rethinking the way they run the buildings they already have. The district has implemented green cleaning programs across the district, using sustainable products, low-environmental impact equipment, and custodial staff training.

Other districts have formed task forces on sustainability to start the conversation around

going green, which has led to the drafting of plans or road maps for implementing district-wide sustainability practices.

MAKING THE COMMITMENT

A strong commitment to green schools requires district leadership to have a clear understanding of the community's existing values and how a commitment to sustainability fits into both short- and long-term goals.

As you well know, districts are home to as many opinions as there are people. Establishing a task force and hosting a communitywide green forum will allow for a diverse cross-section of leaders to have a seat at the table. Including parents, teachers, and students in the planning process is essential.

Gone are the days of limiting Mom and Dad to the roles of coaches, car-poolers, and bake-sale organizers. Today's parents bring their personal and professional expertise and viewpoint that can be invaluable in developing a road map for a green district.

Parents with day jobs as architects, engineers, and green advisers can contribute much-needed technical expertise. Professors, researchers and health professionals can aid

the district in identifying green strategies that will maximize financial savings and prioritize student performance and well-being.

Teachers too bring a valuable perspective because they are best equipped to tell you what they and their students need to succeed. With an increasing number of teachers coming from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, you may not have to look beyond school property to connect with experts on environmental, health, and economic issues. These people can offer realistic solutions that will meet the needs of today's unbounded learners and currently constrained budgets.

It takes teacher support to roll out effective day-to-day energy and resource conservation practices, but few will be more dedicated to improved classroom environments that support the district's objectives and offer increased opportunities for experiential learning.

BRING IN THE STUDENTS

Students often are overlooked as contributors to school board policies. At the same time, young people are the greatest driving force behind the sustainability movement. Today, some of the strongest advocates for

resource conservation, clean energy, and climate-change awareness are the very 21st century learners you represent.

At Great Seneca Creek Elementary School, a LEED Gold facility in Germantown, Md., there is a six-month waiting list to join the student-led recycling team. This year, District of Columbia students will volunteer as energy patrols, educating teachers and other students on how simple acts—like turning off lights and computers—can save energy and money.

Don't underestimate your students' capabilities. At the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va., students helped raise more than \$56,000 to install solar panels on the roof. Students researched the benefits of green schools and made a presentation to board members and the head of district facilities and transportation services, asking that their new addition be built green and pursue LEED certification.

Going green is a journey, not a destination. Your contribution is to get the ball rolling and help the district to build momentum and capacity. Help your district map out a vision and identify concrete ways to move forward.

Simple strategies that have virtually no cost can have significant impact on energy use and utility budgets. Student groups can create signs that encourage stewardship and increase environmental literacy. Resolutions for green procurement practices ask facilities staff to reevaluate service providers that support school operations, like custodial and food services. Selecting companies that have green practices and use green products can have a positive impact on the environment, occupant health, and the project budget.

This win-win-win is often referred to as the triple bottom line of sustainability. Solutions that support planet, people, and prosperity are true examples of green leadership. ■

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Want more information?

A variety of resources are available to help your district take incremental steps toward becoming a green district. Visit www.greenschoolbuildings.org/ASBJ to access research and resources, including a sample green schools resolution that can be customized to meet your district's needs. For more information, go to www.asbj.com and click on Resources to access our "Going Green" special report.

About USGBC

The Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Green Building Council is committed to a prosperous and sustainable future for our nation through cost-efficient and energy-saving green buildings. The organization has 78 local affiliates, more than 20,000 member companies and organizations, and more than 100,000 LEED accredited professionals. The driving force of an industry that is projected to soar to \$60 billion by 2010, the USGBC leads a diverse constituency of builders and environmentalists, corporations and nonprofit organizations, elected officials and concerned citizens, and teachers and students. For more information, visit www.usgbc.org.