

Taking the LEED

Districts can reach their green building goals by going for the gold standard in environmental construction certification.

Here are some examples of districts that are succeeding

In November 2008, with unprecedented support from taxpayers, California's Sweetwater Union High School District passed a \$3.2 billion bond issue to repair or rebuild each of its 29 schools. For school board President Arlie Ricasa, the money presented the district with a "great opportunity" to do the right thing—go green.

To do that, Ricasa and the board had to sell the concept to the superintendent and administrative team, then to the community. Once that was successful, the board unanimously approved a resolution that sent a powerful message to the district's 42,000 students and 3,800 staff—Sweetwater Union would pursue Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for all of its schools.

Currently, there are 265 schools that have been LEED certified, and hundreds more are going through the process with the goal of certification upon completion. LEED, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), is the leading program for the design, construction, and operation of green buildings. "We wanted 100 percent of our construction projects to be LEED Gold certified," Ricasa says, noting that no other California district had made this level of commitment.

According to Ricasa, the community's response has been positive and sup-

portive. The board and district staff shared their green building goals, citing benefits such as improved student health and lower utility costs. Two years into the rebuilding effort's first phase, Sweetwater is well on its way to becoming one of the greenest school districts in the country.

Yes, you can

Every school district will take a different path to green. Some, like Sweetwater, start with a districtwide commitment to "green" new construction. Others begin by focusing on specific areas for improvement, like energy management, indoor air quality, or cleaning practices.

For most districts, focusing on existing schools yields the greatest impact in terms of buildings improved, dollars saved, and students served. LEED for Existing Buildings: Operations & Maintenance (O&M), a rating system for existing buildings, acts as a road map for district sustainability initiatives and provides criteria for addressing water and energy performance, transportation practices, indoor air quality management and cleaning, purchasing, and waste management policies.

Rather than focus on new construction or renovations, LEED for Existing Buildings: O&M helps facilities teams improve the ongoing operation of exist-

ing facilities, drive down utility costs, and uncover operating inefficiencies.

Last year, the USGBC released the *Green Existing Schools Toolkit* to help districts launch and implement initiatives to green existing facilities. The free toolkit (available at www.usgbc.org/K12toolkit) details how to conduct organizational assessments, educate and train staff, navigate the LEED certification process, and manage a districtwide plan.

Even though certification is awarded to individual facilities, many of the LEED credits focus on policies, programs, and plans that are best implemented at the district level. Rather than focusing on one school at a time, districts can incrementally improve operations and maintenance practices across all school buildings.

Baby steps, big rewards

Pennsylvania's Council Rock School District has the benefit of those incremental improvements through a program that resulted in massive reductions in energy use and huge savings.

After a 2005 benchmarking study by the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials identified Council Rock as one of the state's highest spenders on energy, this district looked hard at its operational effectiveness. Led by Tom Schneider, the district's operations supervisor, staff identified and implemented energy efficiency measures that reduced consumption by 45.5 percent, while costing Council Rock just \$150,000.

The turning point was enrolling in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program, which gave the facilities team access to a variety of energy and money-saving tools

and resources.

"We're doing things that anybody can do," says Schneider, adding that the district achieved these savings "strictly through operational and cultural changes." Preventative measures, like coil maintenance and filter changes, have had the greatest impact.

Energy Star provided an assessment of Council Rock's consumption patterns and helped chart a course for improvement. The program's resources, including benchmarking tools, energy-savings calculators, financing and purchasing guides, and activities for students, continue to engage children and adults.

Schneider's favorite part? It's all free.

Focusing on "quick start" projects with the greatest potential for financial impact was critical in order to swiftly gain support from district leaders and the school community. Over three years, Council Rock saved more than \$4.7 million in energy costs and reduced carbon emissions by more than 7,000 metric tons, the equivalent of the annual emissions from more than 1,300 vehicles.

Outside help for indoor environments

The New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) also has taken advantage of new financial and infrastructure opportunities to improve occupant health and well-being and enhance the learning environment. Even prior to Hurricane Katrina, the district's facilities were in dire need of improvement thanks to a history of neglect and a legacy of deferred maintenance. In Katrina's wake, the RSD found new funding, new opportunities, and new talent.

An EPA Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Tools for Schools program provides resources, support from national experts, and Tiffany Delcour, a fully funded staff member. Delcour, who is helping RSD create healthy learning environments for all students, says her first task was to take stock of the district's challenges.

"It's kind of amazing the things you can find walking through a school with a fresh pair of eyes," she says. "If you're

not thinking about a building with indoor air quality in mind, it's easy not to see the importance of those things."

Delcour looks for potential air quality hazards, such as pest entry points, blocked air vents, idling school buses, and other pollution sources. She spends much of her time working with a variety of staff, from teachers tracking attendance to nurses monitoring asthma issues.

In the coming months, Delcour will train more than 100 individuals to be part of the Air Team, educating them on environmental contaminants and teaching them to be effective advocates for healthy air in schools. Air Team members "know what the problems are and how to fix them," she says.

All of the district's new buildings are pursuing LEED Silver, but Delcour hopes indoor air quality will be as much a priority for existing buildings as it is for new ones.

Top down, bottom up

Most of Delcour's day-to-day support comes from students and staff, but her ability to make a difference districtwide is contingent on support from key administrators. Leading RSD's Air Team are the district's chief operating officer, health services coordinator, capital budget and improvement director, and head HVAC engineer. All attended the IAQ Tools for Schools Symposium in January 2009 in Washington, D.C.

"It was amazing," says Delcour of the high-level support her program receives. "To have our COO sit in an HVAC seminar and really understand what we're dealing with is huge."

RSD isn't alone in seeing the value of gaining cross-departmental support for green initiatives. Patrick Pizzo, facilities and operations director for New York's East Meadow School District, says consensus is the secret to the success of his district's award-winning green cleaning program.

"We found these programs work best when you have participation from all levels of the organization," says Pizzo, noting

he and his staff decided not to roll out a program in a top-down fashion. "I haven't seen something like that be successful. It only works if people buy into it."

Pizzo worked with people from across the district and community. His team hosted trainings, attended forums, gathered input from parent groups, and met regularly with principals. Not everyone immediately jumped on board, but Pizzo says the inclusive approach has helped turn challengers into champions.

Implementing tips from the Healthy Schools Campaign's *Quick and Easy Guide to Green Cleaning* introduced best practices to staff at East Meadow and brought them national recognition as a Green Cleaning in Schools Award recipient in 2009.

Shifting operations and culture

What do these school districts have in common? Each has used sustainability programs as catalysts for cultural shifts in their respective communities.

Council Rock's attempt to save money on energy is now a full-fledged energy management and educational program. What Schneider describes as a "technical operations program" has become "a cultural change program, where involving the staff, students, and the community has been a real success."

Sweetwater's new green construction projects have brought the district beyond facilities. The district has launched initiatives like an eco-engineering academy focusing on green construction and green automobile technology.

"Those are the kinds of things as educators and policymakers that really make this come to life, and really make a difference in everything we're doing at every step," says Ricasa. "This is something that will not only be the hot topic for the month, it's something that we'll carry on from here on out." ■

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