Chapter 27
The Future of Green Schools

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ABSTRACT

The topic of green schools has come into the public discourse with increasing visibility in the past few years. This chapter illustrates one vision of the direction that the green schools movement is taking and the direction it will need to take to be successful. The author discusses several steps needed to follow through on the promise of better learning and teaching environments for students and school staff, from better transparency and understanding about school conditions to alignment around the strategies needed to make schools healthy, efficient, and inspiring. Using stories, case studies, and survey data, this chapter demonstrates solutions that are currently working and what may be needed to scale these efforts up by increasing public engagement in the green schools movement.

INTRODUCTION

The vision of green schools for every child is compelling: bright, clean, inspiring spaces for students, where each feels valued by his or her community and where ongoing learning is part of the fabric of the environment. When every parent demands a better place for his or her child to learn and when taxpayers vote for needed repairs to their communities’ schools, this vision will become reality. Public awareness has already begun to influence school district policies and practices, the job skills of school facilities professionals and the preparation of classroom professionals and educational leaders. More work will be needed to lay the foundation for public demand to grow and continue to affect school environments across the country.

First, we need a shared understanding of the baseline condition of our school facilities and their current challenges. We must know the starting point in order to show improvement, and cultivating transparency around school facility information will be crucial to that effort. Second, we need alignment within the various pathways that schools take toward ensuring green school environments. A common understanding of the current state, the challenges and the solutions will lend the clarity needed to increase public engagement in the green schools movement.

WHERE WE LEARN MATTERS

Imagine the best future school you can think of. Maybe you think of schools that are so efficient
that their renewable energy sources generate enough energy to also fuel the school district’s bus fleet. Maybe you think of schools that use the community produce garden as an anchor for project-based learning about history, science, social justice and math. Perhaps you imagine schools where students learn to make healthier choices and leave every day feeling better than when they arrived.

Every year, the Council of Educational Facilities Planners International (CEFPI) asks middle school students to imagine the greatest school they can think of in their School of the Future Competition. In 2008, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC®) hosted the regional finals at our Washington, D.C. offices, and I witnessed something that was at once inspiring and heart-breaking.

The first student team arrived with a scale model of the most fantastic school they could dream up. It had solar panels and living walls and outdoor classrooms. It was decked out with wind turbines and classes in five languages and daylit places for students to gather inside. These students were from a Maryland school district that is relatively well-funded and an early adopter of green building practices. The judges were blown away by these students and their presentation—clearly they had worked hard and imagined big.

After these students had left the room, our next group came in to set up. The judges were puzzled as the group set down its model: a simple box in the middle of a green field. And then the students began their presentation. “This is our dream school,” they said. “In the future, we envision a school that has windows you can see through, bathrooms that work, a place to go to do our homework and four basketball hoops instead of two so that we don’t have to wait in line at recess.” For these students, from one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., this school was the biggest dream they could muster. They wanted a school that would work for them instead of against them, one that would support as opposed to get in the way of their education.

When asked what constitutes the best education for their child, parents will consistently point toward teachers and curriculum—the who and the what. Rarely do those outside the building industry think about the physical environment’s effect on health, productivity or learning—the where. The places where students learn are critically important, however, to their ability to retain information, learn new skills and stay healthy and in school. The students from the Washington, D.C. team in the School of the Future Competition are, sadly, not unique. The schools our children attend send a message about how they are valued in society, what they can expect from their communities and how big they can dream; and thousands of these schools are in a state of disrepair.

THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS

One of the core challenges for getting from vision to reality for green schools is a lack of willingness to talk openly and honestly about the problems we face. Facilities staff at schools and districts are not equipped, supported or encouraged to speak up for needed resources. And when they are indeed able to speak, their audiences often do not have the context or common language to understand the challenges schools face. More often than not, teachers are also discouraged from and even punished for raising concerns about facilities issues in their classrooms. School districts are often hesitant to publish energy performance data by school, for fear of the swarm of parents who will call and demand to know why their child’s school is the lowest performing in the district.

The last comprehensive survey and study of the condition of our nation’s public schools was conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) 18 years ago, in 1995. In 2008, the 21st Century School Fund attempted to estimate deferred maintenance load at the nation’s public
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