

Increase Your Green: People, Planet, and Profits

Sustainability practices make good sense environmentally and financially.

By Jennifer Seydel and Erin Green



Thanks to a growing body of research, we know that green, sustainable schools have a positive effect on student health and academic achievement. But sustainable practices help “green” the bottom line as well.

Sustainability makes good business sense. And as business officials, we should focus on its benefits to people, the planet, and profits and join the effort to adopt sustainable business principles. Regardless of the size of your district, its geographic location, or its available budget, you can green your bottom line and benefit your district’s schools in the process.

Here are a few examples of successful strategies that may put sustainability on your radar:

The Business Officer as Sustainability Officer

As the business manager of the Greendale School District in Wisconsin, Erin, coauthor of this article, was invited to participate in a grant to implement the Environmental Protection Agency’s indoor air quality (IAQ) program for schools. Greendale is a suburban Milwaukee district with 2,600 students attending five schools.

Through participation in the IAQ for schools program, Erin realized that as a school business officer, she could be doing much more to create healthy learning environments. In 2010, using a shared leadership model, she created a sustainability team in Greendale composed of teachers, students, community members, and district personnel. The team’s work has produced a healthier, safer, more productive and cost-efficient environment with an annual energy cost savings of at least \$200,000 and a reduction in workers’ compensation claims that is saving the district \$50,000 a year (see Figure 1).

Initiatives that have had a positive or neutral effect on the bottom line of district operations costs include energy-efficient lighting, solar thermal panels, athletic field irrigation systems, green cleaning chemicals, and healthier cafeteria foods. Community initiatives have also had a positive effect on the health and well-being of students.

Leading sustainability initiatives has allowed Erin not only to save precious dollars for the school district and develop relationships with faculty and staff whom she normally does not have an opportunity to work with but also to improve student and staff attendance and achievement rates.

Blazing Trails

How would you like to boast about \$38.8 million in new revenues and savings, including deferred future utility energy costs? How about \$3.5 million for lease purchase initiatives and future performance contracts related to your transportation fleet? Those amounts come from “green initiatives” implemented in the Lee’s Summit R-7 School District in Missouri and reflect the

positive financial impact on the district's operating budget through green best practices. Lee's Summit is a suburban Kansas City district that encompasses 117 square miles with an enrollment of nearly 18,000 students.

Under the leadership of Tom Kurucz, deputy superintendent of operations (now retired), the district implemented a number of sustainable initiatives that also made economic sense and had a positive effect on the district's bottom line during a difficult financial period. Initiatives included (a) performance contracts, (b) a green cleaning initiative, (c) use of alternative fuels in the purchase and delivery truck fleet, (d) an expanded district-wide recycling program, (e) development of an Energy Savings Olympic Competition among the K-12 schools that challenged students and teachers to change behaviors, (f) a bus-idling and sound reduction program, and (g) the integration of utility dashboard kiosks in all schools to support curriculum initiatives.

Motivated by cost savings and a desire to choose a cleaner, more modern technology, the district also shifted the bulk of its bus fleet to compressed natural gas in just two years. In the 2013-2014 school year, Lee's Summit boasted one of the nation's cleanest school bus fleets. With 106 of its 149 buses fueled by clean, efficient natural gas, the Lee's Summit program is thought to be the largest of its kind in the country. With a savings of \$2.58 per gallon of compressed natural gas, the district expects to save \$11 million over 10 years in fuel and maintenance costs.

Policy Pushes the Agenda

The Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) in Colorado has focused on sustainable management for over 20 years. In the summer of 2008, the district hired a sustainability manager, and in 2009, it implemented a sustainability management system (SMS) in partnership

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Ramp up your knowledge of sustainability by attending the fifth annual Green Schools National Conference in Virginia Beach, Virginia, March 4-7, 2015.

Learn more at www.greenschoolsnationalnetwork.org/conference.

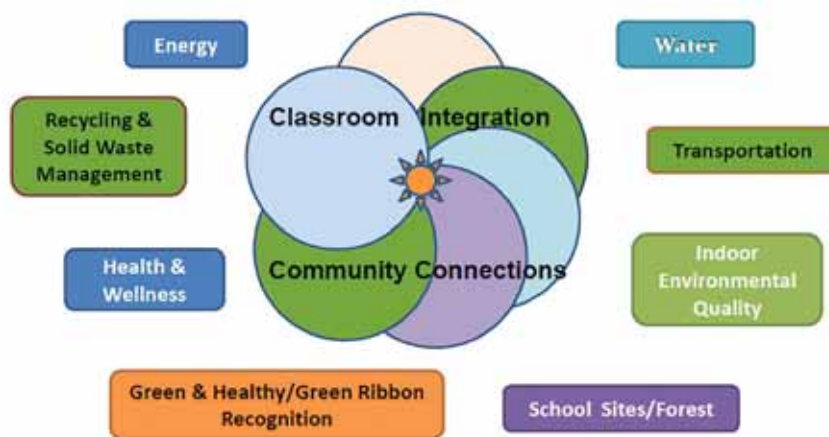


Figure 1. Greendale School District Sustainability Team Initiatives

with a leading sustainability consulting firm. The SMS provided a comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing four crosscutting themes: buildings, materials, transportation, and education.

The SMS baseline determined metrics of performance in each area and continues to serve as a tool to focus attention at all levels on critical environmental, economic, and social issues. In 2012, BVSD published its first "Sustainability Management System Progress Report" (www.bvdsd.org/green/Documents/2012_SustainabilityProgressReport.pdf).

The board of education in Boulder advanced BVSD's efforts by adopting a policy stating its commitment to the triple bottom line. In simple terms, that policy, adopted in 2010, prioritizes the initiatives set forth in the sustainability management system and formalizes the accountability of school officials toward the goals of the SMS. As a result, the board exemplifies the community-wide commitment to enact policy to implement best practices related to sustainable operations and management.

Conclusion

When business officers—working with school administration, staff, and community members—assume leadership roles in such initiatives, they can create physical spaces that inspire learning and cultivate citizens with the skills and knowledge necessary for the future.

Together we can create learning communities dedicated to inspiring and motivating people, to saving the planet, and to greening the bottom line.

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