

Greening Your School



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Raise Achievement and Save Money

By Jennifer Afdahl Rice

What is a green school? According to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), a green school is a school building or facility that creates a healthy environment that is conducive to learning while saving energy, resources and money.

Why build a green school? According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population spends time in a school every day. Ensuring that school environments are healthy places to be is important. There are countless economic, social, health and environmental reasons for going green.

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SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

Green schools are healthier, happier and better for the environment – and they are a real possibility for California charter schools.

A common misconception about going green is the cost. However, a 2006 Capital E report, “Greening America’s Schools: Costs and Benefits” determined that the benefits outweigh the perceived costs. This study analyzed 30 green schools built in 10 states between 2001 and 2006. At the time of the study, green school construction on average cost less than 2 percent, more than conventional school construction, or the equivalent of \$3 per square foot. There are also examples of green school construction without any cost premium, especially as cost effective green materials are becoming more widely available and as construction teams gain expertise in this area. Moreover, the long-term cost savings for a green school are clear—about \$70 per square foot, or 20 times as high as the cost of going green. This includes savings related to reduced water and energy costs, improved teacher retention, and lower health-related costs, which can add up to approximately \$12 per square foot.

The best way to manage the costs of going green is to plan early. Many low-cost green elements can be added to the early design work, but it is often difficult and more expensive to add these same components later in the design and construction process.

What does it mean to build green? There are many ways to green your facility. General practices include incorporating environmental practices into your energy usage, water management, material use, and indoor environmental quality. Specific elements include natural lighting, thermal control systems, low water flow toilets, and recycling and transportation practices. You may also consider commissioning your site to determine if the building energy and other systems are working as they should. While this can add initial costs to your project, the return on investment is quickly earned, through reduced energy use and lower operating and maintenance costs down the road. In California, green schools can be officially certified through either Leadership

in Engineering and Environmental Design (LEED) or the Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS). The State of California also has a process for certifying state-funded, charter school projects through their High Performance Incentive program. Not all sites will qualify for all certification programs. You will need to work with your construction team to determine if and what type of certification is right for you.

How can we fund a green facility? Traditional sources of debt financing, including loans and bonds, are available to fund the construction of a green facility or to enhance an existing facility. Just like your construction team, your lender should have experience working with green buildings. Grants and rebates, especially from utility companies, are also available in California to make green construction more affordable. Finally, Power Purchase Agreements are possible for schools with large solar projects. Schools, like those in Los Angeles Unified School District, are banding together to incentivize companies to provide their buildings with solar power systems.

Charter schools throughout California are starting to include green elements in their buildings. Charter Management Organizations are paving the way with certifying their green construction projects. For example, Green Dot has three LEED Certified schools, including *Ánimo Pat Brown*. Green schools are healthier, happier and better for the environment – and they are a real possibility for California charter schools.

Look for NCB Capital Impact’s upcoming publication for charter operators: *The Answer Key: Green Charter School Facility Guide*, coming this fall. ●

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