

# Creating Good Schools—What If?

By Tim Sanders



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**D**one right, green is not only the right thing to do, it's a good business move. During the past year, I've talked with quite a few school business officials. Some are on board with "going green," whereas others are still leery. Some, I think, aren't quite sure what "green schools" are. I quickly explain that a school is green when it provides a safe and healthy learning environment that is resource efficient and sustainably sourced.

Some say that it doesn't matter to the community how green the school is, that going green is expensive, and that this is a bad time to increase expenses.

Some point out that their business charter as a school is to deliver an education and that the concept of healthy green schools lies just outside that boundary, making it a "good economic times" luxury.

I ask these folks, "What if . . . ?"

What if parents really cared about the healthiness, energy efficiency, and sustainability of the schools their kids attended? What if the kids cared about it too? What if green could save money? What if green schools produced better-educated students?

To a person, these skeptics would say, "If you can show me that, tell me where to start."

## Start with People

Millions of Americans are part of a growing consumer segment that passionately promotes products and services that align with social values ranging from health to ecology. In 2005, research conducted by the Natural Marketing Institute in conjunction with author and sociology researcher Paul H. Ray identified this new market, which they deemed as having lifestyles of health and sustainability (LOHAS).

According to the study, 63 million adult Americans are LOHAS consumers and spend almost half a trillion dollars annually. Unlike previous findings in which consumers showed a willingness to switch to a socially good company when price was roughly equal, Paul Ray's study found that even though LOHAS consumers are not necessarily wealthier than other Americans, they are willing to spend up to a 20% premium on clean, green products over non-sustainable alternatives.

Although the recent economic downturn may put a damper on the sale of organic fruit or earth-friendly furniture, it will not be long lasting. Followers of LOHAS are not only resilient in their values, they are vocal about it. Significant numbers of parents in your school district are

likely in this LOHAS segment, wondering what your school is doing to improve its sustainability.

You can see this trend already, with the rise of green university building planning. This movement is fueled by government incentives, combined with college students and parents who believe they are making a difference by supporting schools that are “thoughtful” in their design and planning.

### Green Is Affordable

Done right, you can green up your school for free. I’ve studied dozens of organizations that have made the decision to “go green.” They consider efforts to reduce environmental impact now or in the future as a strategic area of innovation. Factories, call centers, hospitals, office buildings, and universities have all benefited from their sustainability efforts through lower operational expenses, increased productivity, and improved community goodwill (which has political capital).

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The key is to understand the proper sequence of the four Rs of going green: reduce, reuse, recycle, and replace. Apply them in order and you’ll discover how Interface Incorporated saved \$300 million in five years. You’ll find out how the city of Seattle cut its bills by more than 25% in areas such as electricity, printing, and shipping.

**Reduce.** Any sustainability initiative should be centered on reducing the use of resources, such as energy, paper, and fuel.

The best way to generate an immediate financial win with green is to create a specific goal of reducing the use of electricity. Invite everyone to participate by turning off lights, power strips, and other energy vampires.

One school district cut costs by creating a magnet that displayed the meal menu for an entire semester rather than printing paper menus every week. Another school put menus online, with paper copies available by request. One school used de-lighting as a way of reducing heating and lighting expenses.

Once you embark on this journey, you’ll likely find your own areas of eco-innovations that equate to savings.

**Reuse.** Step two of the sustainability strategy is to reuse before replacing. Whenever possible, eliminate disposable items, such as event-specific signs or throwaway cutlery. Put off equipment upgrades, especially if they aren’t necessary for basic functionality. By delaying our impulse to replace, we can again save money and reduce resource consumption.

**Recycle and replace.** After a few years of reduction and reuse innovations, you should have a handle on your budget for the investment steps of sustainability: recycle and replace. Whether you are going to hire recycling services or replace unsustainable building ingredients, you now have a war chest to draw from over time. Using this approach is how the business-minded at any organization can eventually go green without breaking the bank.

In 2006, a massive cross-industry study, “Greening America’s Schools” (Kats 2006), analyzed the costs and benefits of sustainability at K–12 institutions. Its findings and the findings of other studies done since, estimate that the maximum up-front investment for a LEED-certified facility is about 2%—roughly three bucks a foot today. In most cases, schools that took the plunge stand to gain a significant return on investment over the next decade.

As Henry Kelly, president of the Federation of American Scientists, shares in the report’s introduction: “Failure to invest in green technologies is not financially responsible for school systems; the study uses conservative accounting practices to show that investments in green technologies significantly reduce the life-cycle cost of operating school buildings. And the public benefits of green schools are even larger than those that work directly to the financial advantage of schools. These include reductions in water pollution, improved environmental quality, and increased productivity of learning in an improved school environment” (Kats 2006, p. 3).

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The report is a must-read for any school business official and can be downloaded free at [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org).

### Good for Learners

Healthy students and teachers make for a good educational environment. Consider the benefits of daylighting, where students have constant access to natural light. The Heshong Mahone Group, a prominent commercial consulting company, conducted a study in 1999 to measure the effect of natural light on students’ comprehension. After examining 2,000 classrooms, researchers determined that the students in the classrooms with natural lighting progressed 20% faster in math and 26% faster in reading than their peers (Heshong Mahone Group 1999).

Green schools also reduce indoor air pollution, which affects learning. In Washington State, a coordinated effort to reduce indoor air pollution and increase the

quality of lighting led to a 5% increase in test scores. A surprise bonus came from increased productivity due to fewer teacher absences and sick days.

### Do It with Purpose

Purpose can do a wonderful thing for education. When children and their parents are part of something bigger than themselves, they engage more and try harder to succeed. A “green up the school” initiative can do just that.

Anyone can ignite a green movement at a school. Consider the case of Barb Nissel, food service supervisor at the Great Valley School District in Pennsylvania. As part of the state’s PA Preferred program, Nissel’s team sought out Pennsylvania-produced food products for students. Unfortunately, the scale of the local businesses kept them from matching national food services vendors. So Nissel decided to grow the food at the schools using the PA Preferred funding as “seed money.”

Staff, students, and parents all pitched in to help care for and pick a variety of vegetables that were turned into lively pesto, delicious butternut squash bread, salsa, soups, and a host of better-than-you-usually-get-at-school food. One hundred energetic volunteers contributed to feeding 4,500 students at 14 schools, with a surplus that went home to the dinner tables of students’ families. Talk about a virtuous circle!

Nissel told me that the program boosted parents’ involvement with the school and their satisfaction with it. “There was a high participation factor like we’ve never seen before,” she exclaims. “But it wasn’t easy, by any stretch. If it were easy, every school would have its own garden. We had to solve problems to keep it organic. Packaging and storage posed challenges, especially as we were trying to be local and green at the same time.”

In the end, though, her story underscores the opportunity for school business officials to reconsider greening up their schools in one way or another. Talk to your managers, your staff, your teachers, your students, and their parents. Start with something affordable and celebrate progress along the way.

You’ll feel great knowing that your school can do well by doing good.

### References

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