

## **Accessing Dollars Creatively in a New Era of Partnerships and Collaborations**

By Barbara Wasserman, M.B.A.

The school sustainability movement offers hard-dollar opportunities for districts whose boards are willing to think creatively, act quickly on opportunities and engage their communities. While "sustainability" is the current buzzword, a more comprehensive term might be "education efficiency" as sustainability programs offer cost savings, operations enhancements and curriculum that reflects 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. It's a district-level paradigm shift as the *business of education* enters this new collaborative phase.

The Irvine United School District has taken up the greening of the district as an energy efficient imperative to cut energy costs. The savings will be applied to their general fund, which therefore will provide more money for classroom use. The school board has proactively pursued federal stimulus dollars for sustainability projects, such as solar installations in which they have partnered with utilities, local governments, businesses and universities in an effort to provide a cutting-edge education experience.

Green Dot Public Schools is upgrading the urban public education experience in a similar manner. Originally focused on transforming Los Angeles public education, Green Dot relies on strong partnerships with traditional unified school districts such as LAUSD, local governments, the United Teachers Federation and non-profits such as the Oscar De La Hoya Foundation. Together, they provide an education model that translates into a more successful and efficient experience for students, teachers and the community. Facility dollars are spent on energy efficiency and technology improvements that are credited with improving the overall education experience, and curriculum is geared towards 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. The model has been so successful that Green Dot replicated it successfully in the Bronx, New York, with further expansion planned.

## Environmental

Sustainability in K-12 education is focused on meeting specific environmental, facility and curriculum measurements. For example, Integrated Pest Management programs (IPM) have been broadly adopted by numerous states to reduce student and faculty exposure to hazardous chemicals used for pest control and grounds management. The programs offer a best practices template for community engagement on environment issues.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has received national recognition for its innovative and all-inclusive approach to pesticide use and pest control education by involving vendors, district grounds staffs, teachers, parents and students in the program. The education component was so successful that best practices 'leaked' beyond the school into homes and businesses. The success of the program was the impetus for the [State of California's Healthy Schools Act of 2000](#) and [AB-405](#).

## Facilities

Building and remodeling projects are being driven by [CHPS](#) (Collaborative for High Performance Schools) and [LEED](#) (U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certifications, where numerous opportunities per project exist for public and private funding. Both programs define green building standards; CHPS specifically for school facilities and LEED provides a more global standard. Irvine USD's building resolution follows the CHPS guidelines. Poway USD works in conjunction with San Diego Gas & Electric's Sustainable Communities Program that provides incentives for LEED designed buildings.

## Curriculum

Curriculum evolution is being directed by marketplace changes such as alternative energy innovations and advancement, as evidenced by the [RE-ENERGYSE](#) (REgaining our ENERGY Science and Engineering Edge) program, which, significantly, is housed at the U.S. Department of Energy, rather than at the Department of Education. At the regional level, utilities are working to continue this trend by funding education incentives such as [Pacific Gas & Electric's Solar Schools Program](#) which includes grants to support innovative solar science projects in classrooms.

These changes are broad and present opportunities for school districts to partner with private and government entities in new ways.

## **Leveraging Needs**

Due to the number and volume of facility needs, districts have the opportunity to strategically leverage construction, retrofitting, and renovation contracts that benefit from regulatory reform and energy technology advancements. What grants and/or other financial incentives are available to help fund the projects. How do the capital improvements save the district money and when can the school district realize the cost savings? Can the project(s) be leveraged for additional benefits in the areas of financial, operational or curriculum enhancement?

Borrego Solar Company is one company that offers a comprehensive approach to energy efficiency. Borrego works with districts to help secure solar funding then installs the solar panels and offers a solar curriculum using the installed panels to aid in education and training. The company wins the business. The district wins on the facility upgrade, saved energy costs and a real-world curriculum that benefits the 21st century student.

## **Leveraging Relationships**

There are many exceptional partnerships being implemented at all levels of education. Look for these innovative programs to become the rule rather than the exception. An example is the [Savings by Design](#) initiative sponsored by the major California utility companies, where the goal of facility design is to build toward a zero energy cost. With a view towards the future [Smart Grid](#), this partnership leverages environmental and design components to strengthen student achievement by improving student health.

## **Leveraging Innovation**

There are also opportunities to incorporate the zero energy cost reasoning into math and science curriculum. Energy labs that focus on research and design of renewable energy options, such as University of California at Irvine's "[living renewable energy lab](#)," are beginning to gain traction and dollars on college campuses and have the possibility to trend to K-12 institutions, as a new marketing avenue.

The RE-ENERGYSE program will be focusing on innovative ways to integrate science and math into K-12 education to better prepare the next generation for the 'clean energy race.' It is loosely modeled on the 1960s push on math and science education inspired by the space race. The program, still in a planning phase, seeks to reward innovative energy solutions that will directly impact curriculum. The thinking seems to be somewhat parallel to the

aviation industry [Orteig Prize](#), which inspired Lindbergh's flight or the [XPrize Foundation](#) which awards innovation prizes in numerous industries.

What can school districts do to benefit from the current momentum of change? The race towards alternative energy is a trend that will continue. The challenge is to leverage environmental, facility and curriculum programs to better serve the overall needs of the district and specific schools.

To stay on top, learn what programs are being tried by other districts, states and regions through industry conferences, summits, online forums and advocates that can pool and prioritize information. Be open to new ideas and partnerships that contribute to your district's goals and objectives. Ask the right questions. Listen for answers. Reach out for new solutions.



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