

What's Keeping Us?

Some Thoughts on Moving Forward

By Robert J. Kobet

Recognize we still have a massive job of educating all the critical stakeholders, especially those with administrative decision-making and fiscal responsibility. Understand the potential for LEED and CHPS to enrich the educational delivery process. Ultimately, the goal is to provide the best learning environment possible. Work to optimize the investment in high performance green schools while minimizing the risks associated with the design, construction, operation and maintenance of high performance green schools.

Anyone involved with the high performance green school movement knows we have a lot to celebrate. The concept of energy, material and resource efficient facilities optimized for the health and productivity of the occupant and user designed, constructed, operated and maintained to the extent possible within the carrying capacity of the planet has certainly made inroads in the K-16 arena. School administrations are benefitting from a growing awareness and appreciation of maximizing the connections between facilities, the community and curriculum and what that can do to enrich the educational delivery process. Happily – and I believe very significantly – greening school curricula has taken on a life of its own, independent of the need for a modern, high performance green school facility. The literature is full of case studies, articles and examples of successful green school initiatives that cite a variety of projects genuinely deserving of the title “green school.”

At the same time, my experience is that eleven years after the founding of CHPS and five years after the launch of LEED for Schools, many stakeholders in critical decision making positions know very little about what comprises each and certainly cannot accurately compare the two. When I teach LEED for

Schools workshops I often ask the group, “What is LEED Silver?” They know they want “LEED Silver”, based on the popular position that LEED Silver is the minimum they should accept, but are not sure exactly what they are asking for. More important is often project participants responsible for writing requests for proposals and reviewing the requests for qualifications are not aware of their own central role and responsibility in insuring the success of a LEED or CHPS project.

This realization becomes significant when the popular press features schools embroiled in lawsuits based on failure to perform as anticipated. (www.greenbuildinglawupdate.com) The economic downturn, staff reductions and pressure to limit resources only to core services and basic needs has distracted decision makers from pursuing high performance green schools or investing in an integrated design approach that would justify the investment in a robust, comprehensive project. In many of these scenarios the enthusiasm for teacher and staff workshops to learn how to use the school as a teaching tool, green the curriculum or pursue public / private partnerships and community connections is dampened. The priority becomes building the building and little else. Faced with tight budgets and abbrevi-



ated building programs and education specifications the project team has little incentive to go beyond what they are charged to do. “LEED Silver” loses its luster as the team ponders why a site with little potential to achieve any Sustainable Sites credits was chosen. When first cost is the only parameter for pursuing the minimum number of LEED points necessary, teams staffed with cost estimators who do not understand integrated design, or who do not believe it is their responsibility to suggest savings based on the same, are at a disadvantage from the beginning. Teams instructed to ignore life cycle cost issues cannot be expected to advocate for sustainable design features or LEED points like Enhanced Commissioning, Daylighting and Measurement and Verification, even though the literature shows these are sound investments that pay back in a



short period of time. Their academic value is well established, so the purpose of the school – to educate – is also impacted. More critical, perhaps are the LEED points and associated opportunities lost when the successful project “team” quickly argues them away because they simply do not understand or know how to approach them, or when time and budget constraints or the need to involve other consultants make them marginally desirable.

Once the facility is constructed, the same pressures can limit effective operation and maintenance and cause the administration to overlook the cost effectiveness and proven academic value of involving the staff and students in the environmental stewardship and care of the school building and site. This limits the potential return on the investment and influences the long-term ability to keep energy and maintenance costs to a minimum. As is so often the case, every dollar drained by inadequate maintenance is one lost to academic programs. The irony of this is that in a high performance green school each reinforces the other and maximizes the effective of each. Yet, how many school administrators or RFPs connect effective maintenance and academic performance?

I have had several pointed discussions with stakeholders who are tracking the emergence of the International Green Construction Code (IGCC). The fact that USGBC is a primary partner in the ongoing effort to implement IGCC is noted. Participants frequently ask, “If I comply with the IGCC do I need to

do LEED?” Or, “If I am primarily concerned about energy and operating costs, why should I subject my school district to the costs and complications of a LEED for Schools submission?” These are fair questions in hard economic times. I tell them the fact the IGCC focuses largely on energy, material and resource issues and does not address the essence of what makes a high performance green school a superior learning environment.

So, we find ourselves in an interesting place as we ponder moving sustainability forward. The USGBC Center for Green Schools and the Collaborative for High Performance Schools continue to expand their programs and influence. The growing National Green Schools Network and the International Green Education Network are embracing a highly varied group of constituents. A number of programs joining K12 and institutions of higher learning focused on architecture as pedagogy and the connection between facilities, the community and curriculum continue to make their mark. We need to support these organizations and appreciate them for what they and so many others are contributing to moving sustainability forward. To keep sustainability moving forward as part of a robust high performance green school movement I believe we also need to do the following:

- *Recognize we still have a massive job of educating all the critical stakeholders, especially those with administrative decision-making and fiscal responsibility.* Board members often have different backgrounds and skill sets that collectively benefit the district in a variety of very important ways. While these indi-

viduals may not have a need to hold LEED AP credentials or serve on a CHPS committee, we would all be better served if they have the best understanding possible of what these systems are and how they function. Most important is for them to have a working understanding of their role and how they influence the feasibility and success of the project.

- *Understand the potential for LEED and CHPS to enrich the educational delivery process.* Ultimately, the goal is to provide the best learning environment possible. Too often compartmentalized administration and a linear approach to project development separate responsibilities attributed to developing and maintaining the physical plant from those associated with curriculum and education per se. This is neither wise nor cost effective. It has been said 80% of students who drop out of school have passing grades; they simply don’t want to be there. I believe the most important successes to date are those where LEED or CHPS criteria has been used to optimize the facility as a teaching tool and students have found new excitement and relevance in curriculum that engages them in collaborative learning based on their surroundings. This is particularly important to the success of STEM programs that can benefit significantly from school building systems data, interfacing classes with energy management and measurement and verification systems, building forensics, and a number of other learning opportunities that synthesize academic requirements and the physical environment. Other success stories are those in which the site is utilized to grow food and create natural landscapes. This reality is manifest in the growth of the urban agriculture movement in school gardening programs that benefit the community and the contribution of these and other meaningful



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outdoor school site activities to stress management and positive self-esteem. None of these efforts should be additive. They need to be integrated into the school day and the academic year in ways that are valued, not burdensome.

- *Work to optimize the investment in high performance green schools while minimizing the risks associated with the design, construction, operation and maintenance of high performance green schools.* In order to accomplish these two directly related goals the effort must start as far upstream as possible. Owners must understand the new role and critical influence the RFP process when issuing invitations to participate in LEED and CHPS based projects. Simply dropping a few lines about “must meet LEED Silver” into an otherwise standard RFP format is not sufficient and can lead to contractual and building performance failures. An effective RFP begins with the author(s) having a work-

ing understanding of the rating systems and their responsibilities. It should be based in part on canvassing the teachers, students, staff and community about the extent they are willing to participate to achieve their goals. This takes additional work, but goes a long way to build support, maximize the return on investment and establish a sense of ownership that will survive well beyond the ribbon cutting. The RFP must also exhibit the owner’s insight to the value of such things as requiring building systems modeling as a deliverable early in the project and the willingness to adjust fees or incentivize the effort to be sure the building performance will be optimized prior to the end of design development. In the best case, the RFP should convey the owner as an active, informed participant who understands the project’s potential for greening not just the building, but also the culture of the school district, the community and the region.

There are many other things we can do to move sustainability forward. In the end, it is the product and process of individual efforts that collectively make a difference. We have come a long way; let’s keep going. ■

Robert J. Kobet, AIA, LEED Faculty, is President of the Kobet Collaborative and a Partner in the Kobet Cheatham Group, multifaceted organizations specializing in sustainable design and development, environmental education and risk management in high performance green buildings. Over the past thirty one years, Mr. Kobet has worked on a variety of projects in twelve countries on five continents. In addition to his consulting practice he has enjoyed a parallel career as an educator. He is Chair of LEED for Schools and is currently assisting the Technologico de Monterrey, Campus Queretaro, Mexico with initiatives to green the curriculum and introduce interdisciplinary studios. The Kobet Cheatham Group is working with decision makers and stakeholders to optimize investments in green schools while minimizing risks associated with using the LEED rating system.