Federal Help for Public School Facilities: Where can funds be found?

The 21st Century School Fund is exploring whether it is feasible and advisable for the federal government to use its regulatory powers over the energy sector to help school districts reduce their consumption of natural resources. School buildings and grounds use significant amounts of energy, water, and land in their operations. 21CSF estimates school districts spend approximately $8 billion per year on utilities—energy, water and refuse. Proper planning, design, construction, maintenance and use of facilities can reduce these costs. The Alliance to Save Energy estimates that changes in school occupant and operator behavior alone can save 10% of current costs. However, up to 30% could be saved if school districts are able to invest in more efficient systems, technologies, and components—like energy efficient windows and well insulated roofs.

Would the American people be willing to pay a small fee on their utility bills to reduce the annual utility costs of school districts? Is it possible for our representatives to develop a bill that would collect a fee from the utility sector to generate $3.5 to $5.5 billion annually to improve the quality and efficiency of public school facilities?

This investment would not just reduce school district annual operating costs, but would improve teaching and learning conditions for children and teachers, create jobs and improve the environment. There is already a model for this. The E-Rate raises $2.25 billion per year from consumers through our phone bill and is used to help schools and libraries secure affordable access to modern telecommunications and information services. We would like to hear your thoughts on an Energy Smart School Rate. Is it advisable? Is it feasible? Are there other ways to fund a federal share for facilities that is affordable and won't threaten other federal education funding? Send your funding ideas and thoughts to info@21csf.org

Increasing Interest in School Gardens in the District of Columbia

Staff members at the District Department of the Environment have been encouraging school gardens and environmental education for many years, providing technical support to teachers and building up a store of practical knowledge and useful educational literature. Now these efforts are being bolstered by the establishment of a school garden specialist with the Office of the State Superintendent for Education which has been tasked by the Healthy Schools Act of 2010 (L18-0209) with oversight responsibilities in this area. OSSE has started assembling an inventory of school gardens. If you know of an active school garden please fill out OSSE’s survey: School Garden Snapshot. OSSE’s School Garden Specialist is Sam Ullery sam.ullery@dc.gov.

The Farm at DCPS’s Walker-Jones Education Campus (1125 New Jersey Avenue, NW) was the site of a gathering of more than 60 garden enthusiasts who came together through their interest in the educational value of gardening programs in schools, including DCPS teachers, principals and administrators. A book-talk highlighting environmentally friendly schoolyards (Asphalt to Ecosystems: Design Ideas for Schoolyard Transformation, by Sharon Gamson Danks) referenced gardens at DCPS's Mann and Brent elementary schools. Afterwards, guests toured the Walker-Jones gardens and were treated to a buffet supper made from garden produce.

At Walker-Jones, students from 5th through 8th grade regularly take part in gardening experiences as part of their science program. Walker-Jones classrooms from pre-school on have unlimited access to the gardens for hands-on science, writers workshops, and art classes. While the “Farm” takes up nearly half a city block, more modest school vegetable plots and butterfly environments are increasingly common at District schools.

D.C. Auditor and Inspector General Recommend Reform of District’s School Capital Program

This past spring the D.C. Auditor released a Review of the Operations and Administration of the Office of Public Education Facilities. And in late June, the Office of the Inspector General released the Audit of the
Procurement Activities at the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization. Among a few of the Auditor's recommendations are that OPEFM:

- Establish procedures for expenditures to be reviewed and approved by the Chief Financial Officer.
- Document school modernization communications, key decisions and recommendations of the State Superintendent of Education and the DCPS Chancellor;
- Consult with and provide quarterly reports to the Public School Modernization Advisory Committee; and
- Organize its record keeping so there is a complete history of contract and procurement transactions by school and project;

The Office of the Inspector General recommendations for OPEFM included:

- “Amend OPEFM’s procurement rules to ensure the District’s interest is protected and the rules are consistent with procurement laws.
- Track(ing) contracts and agreements to ensure contractors do not perform work without written agreements once the contracts and agreements expire.”

Illinois Legislation Adopts Chicago Public School Master Planning Bill

The Illinois 97th General Assembly adopted Senate Bill 630 requiring education facilities master planning for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and is awaiting the Governor’s signature. SB 630 was developed from a year long process of broad public input, careful review and analysis of CPS data and studying best practices from around the nation and was guided by the Chicago Educational Facility Planning Task Force. 21st Century School Fund provided research and technical assistance to the Task Force. Key provisions of the bill include:

- The first ever 10-year Facilities Master Plan (draft by Jan 2013; final by July 2013);
- Ground rules to ensure that school facility related decisions are made with broad public input and reflect educationally sound and fiscally responsible criteria;
- Financial transparency;
- Guidelines for closings, co-locations, consolidations, new schools, boundary changes (school actions);
- Transitions plans for students and schools affected by school actions;
- Space utilization and school building performance standards; and
- Requirement for plan coordination with other agencies.

SB 630 will help ensure that Chicago’s first ever Facilities Master Plan will be built on collaborative planning, transparency, information sharing and community input.

Co-location of Schools in New York City

New York City Department of Education is trying to expand public charter options. A major challenge of charter expansion is finding school space to support the new school enrollments. But, as critical, is finding space for a co-location where it will not compromise the educational opportunities of students attending the school or schools already in place. A report by the Office of the Public Advocate for the City of New York, Consensus for Reform, identifies challenges and makes recommendations on processes and guidelines for co-location.

The 21st Century School Fund recently analyzed another co-location proposal of the NYC Public Schools. (First co-location analysis was of PS 15 in Redhook in Brooklyn). The Advocates for Justice, a public interest law firm in New York City requested that 21CSF examine the school utilization and capacity of I.S. 303 to see whether it could accommodate the space needs of Coney Island Prep Charter School. According to the Advocates for Justice, should the co-location go forward, I.S.303 would be forced to abandon their homeroom model for their middle school and return to the departmentalized model in which students move from class to class. A 21st Century School Fund memo to the Advocates of Justice concluded that the classrooms currently in use by I.S. 303 are not “excess” but integral to the quality and character of their program. The loss of space through the proposed co-location could result in I.S. 303 losing the student achievement gains that followed and that they believe resulted from the use of the homeroom model—where 6th and 7th grade students stay in their grade level classes, rather than changing as though they were in high school.