

Q&A with Green Building Leader Anja Caldwell

Anja Caldwell's e-mail signature identifies her as the "proud parent of the first LEED certified school in Maryland," and as the Green Building Program Manager for Montgomery County Public Schools, she has big plans for more green schools on the horizon. Caldwell's work developing the LEED certified Great Seneca School has earned national attention and has positioned her as a voice for design professionals throughout the country who work to bring smart environmental stewardship to the design, maintenance and renovation of schools.



How did you become interested in green schools rather than, say, green offices or homes?

I received my architecture training in Germany, where green building is very much part of the education. I actually used to work on commercial office buildings. Then I became a mother myself so it was a natural fit to take environmental design to schools. I could see not only the environmental impact of the building materials—conserving energy, preventing waste from going into landfills—but also the health impact on children. It combines my three favorite things: architecture, the environment and children! Most green building focuses on energy conservation, because that's where the cost savings are. I also had that focus when I was working on commercial buildings and when I began working on the school. Now you could say I've graduated from energy conservation to indoor air quality and the broader picture of healthy buildings.

What difference have the green elements of the school made for the people who learn and work in it?

I've never really seen anything like it. A school building is a civic facility, part of a community. To see that come together was unbelievable. It's one thing to know that we did good work with our energy conservation, our indoor air quality, our environmentally responsible building materials. It's another thing to see how that spirit transforms a community. We just have a happy principal, happy teachers, happy students. We really have the idea of "green" infused in the school atmosphere, which gives me goose bumps when I talk about it. Before, I was convinced on paper that this was a good idea—but to see it come to life with so many people is unbelievable. The green spirit really is alive at this school. It's contagious.

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What advice do you have for people who want to bring this type of energy to their school through green building or renovation?

Get a good grip on the numbers. It's not the sexiest part of the project, but it's critical. Focus on the current situation, especially the energy use and expenditures. Compare this to national benchmarks and to other schools in the area. Then look at the improvements you can make, what a 30 percent savings on utility bills would mean. Focus on problem-solving and cost savings. If you make some changes toward green design, you will help the district solve other problems by saving money, improving health, improving morale. If you can address these other problems, you're not just this green-infused person asking everyone else to add more work to their already-busy schedule—you're someone who's bringing solutions.

How do you hope to see the field of green building in schools evolve in the next few decades?

I really hope that people are finally going to understand that we need to build better buildings, and we need to spend the money necessary to do a good job. One of the most frustrating things about working in the U.S. has been that so many projects get done as cheaply as possible but are not a good investment or good value because they don't take into consideration the long-term savings that are possible with efficient quality design. My dream is that health insurance companies will give rebates to school districts for staff who work in green schools. We could demonstrate the benefits of green buildings in the numbers, and demonstrate that the benefits go beyond energy savings to have a real impact on health. ■

HSC Connection

HSC brought together a coalition to successfully advocate for legislation requiring that all new schools in Illinois that receive state funding be built to meet energy-efficient green standards. To learn more or to order HSC's Resource Guide for Healthy, High-Performing Schools, check out www.healthyschoolscampaign.org. In the Chicago area? Join HSC and Anja Caldwell on November 6 for a Lunch & Learn event on green building for schools. For details, visit www.healthyschoolscampaign.org or call (312) 419-1810.