



Custodian Joyce Hicknbottom checks the roof-top garden Friday at Tarkington School of Excellence, the Chicago Public Schools' first so-called green building. PHIL VELASQUEZ/TRIBUNE PHOTO

School's green roots go deep

'The building is not just a building but a learning environment,' principal says

By Cara Anthony
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Classrooms in Chicago's Tarkington School of Excellence are equipped with natural light sensors, temperature-regulating windows and acoustically sound walls. It's easier for students to learn in a school that focuses on environmental awareness and education, said school officials.

Going to school in a green environment has even helped the students' test scores go up, said principal Vincent Iturralde.

Tarkington is a model for how schools should be built nationwide, say U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials. Lisa Jackson, the agency's top administrator, will

tour the school July 31 after she addresses environmental education at a community forum on building healthy schools.

Tarkington, 3330 W. 71st St., opened in 2005 as the Chicago Public Schools' first "green" building. Since then, the school system has certified two others and has plans this fall for four new green elementary schools and one high school, said Suzanne Carlson, director of environmental affairs. Five more green schools are scheduled to open in 2010, officials said.

In 1998 the U.S. Green Building Council developed a set of requirements that a building must meet before it can be LEED certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

As soon as Tarkington opened, Iturralde started to work on adding to the school's green efforts.

"We have done a lot to push the kids to be more environmentally friendly," said Iturralde, who also incorporated an environmentally friendly curriculum.

During the school year, all students tend a flower and vegetable garden behind the school. The younger students, including 1st and 2nd graders, learn how plants grow in the school's greenhouse. Students in 7th grade write to public officials about the importance of conservation.

"The building is not just a building but a learning environment," Iturralde said.

Chicago-based Healthy Schools

Campaign invited Jackson to speak at the forum in hopes that communication between Chicago Public Schools and the EPA will improve.

"This is an opportunity for us to showcase our work here in Chicago," said Mark Bishop, the group's deputy director.

Although older school buildings may not be eco-friendly, the school system's environmental action plan is working to make all schools environmentally friendly and to teach students to be environmental stewards.

In 2007 three students at Taft Academic Center established the environmental concerns committee. During the academic year, students at Taft brainstorm about how they can make their school a little

greener and hold events like ink cartridge drives.

Patrice Pirpirus, 13, who will be a freshman at Taft High School in the fall, started the committee along with her sisters Deanna and Juliette.

"As long as you do something to help the environment, it can make a difference," she said.

The forum on environmental health in schools will be held from 7:30 to 9:15 a.m. July 31. It is open to the public but registration is required. For more information, visit healthyschoolscampaign.org or call the Healthy Schools Campaign office at 312-419-1810.

anthony@tribune.com