

SPEARS: Funding 'green' school projects

An energy imperative for high performance

By William S. Spears

As school house doors across the nation swung open last month, signaling the official end to the summer recess, thousands of classroom lights switched on around the country welcoming back millions of students. All the while, energy prices paid to cool, heat and illuminate these institutions continue to escalate ever higher into record territory. This upward trajectory in energy prices will continue to put a serious strain on the resources and capabilities of school districts across the country as they are forced to strike a balance between keeping the teachers they have, improving academic programs, completing capital improvements and meeting the demand of mounting facilities bills for heat, light and air conditioning.

One reality has become clear: Our schools cannot afford to wait for Washington to act. While budgetary pressures associated with higher energy costs continue to worsen for most schools, Congress is currently mired in a battle over a legislative initiative that would provide needed funding and incentives for school districts seeking immediate and long-term relief from higher energy prices. The 21st Century Green High-Performing Public Schools Facilities Act (H.R. 3021) passed the House in June, but continues to sit idle in the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

This legislation would provide states and local educational agencies (LEAs) with funding to repair, modernize and build public schools at the kindergarten, elementary and secondary levels. Most notable is a provision in H.R. 3021 that directs LEAs to dedicate a certain percentage of their funding (from 50 percent in 2009 to 90 percent in 2013) toward projects that meet green building standards.

Partisanship and policy disagreements aside, there now seems to be — for the first time in decades — a broad consensus that environmental stewardship and responsibility directly result in lower spending.

Democrats in Congress insist that America needs to make a serious investment in schools to make them more environmentally friendly and energy efficient — and they are right. Republicans have raised serious concerns over the price tag of the legislation and the long delay time for local schools to realize real energy savings, and they are right as well.

With the partisan battle for H.R. 3021 continuing in Congress between the “red” and “blue” factions in seeming perpetuity, there is an immediate and bipartisan solution that will yield direct results for our nation’s schools and our global environment — without requiring a single new building or the purchase of any expensive new equipment. This

“purple solution,” both environmentally sound and revenue-neutral for taxpayers (in fact, it actually returns money to school budgets), is the development and implementation of sophisticated and customized people-based energy savings programs that produce sustained year-over-year savings of millions of dollars for local school districts, while simultaneously helping to save the environment for those students when they grow up.

As a businessman and former school board member who has spent more than two decades working with school systems large and small to help reduce their energy consumption and save money, I have seen the power of people-based energy conservation firsthand. Far beyond simply reminding teachers and custodians to “turn off the lights,” an effectively managed people-based energy conservation program (which includes assessment, planning, communication, coordination, leadership, focus, and measurement and verification) focuses on hundreds of initiatives, saving millions for cash-strapped schools — right now. That’s the power of human and organizational behavior change. From rural school districts to major universities, people-based energy conservation has returned billions of tax dollars in energy conservation savings to school coffers over the past two decades — without the need for Congress to act,

the construction of one new building, or the capital investment of one dollar.

Even the federal government has recognized the power of people-based conservation. In fact, nearly 50 percent of all ENERGY STAR labeled school buildings, a recognition given by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy for the most energy efficient buildings, have participated in people-based energy management and conservation programs. (With the help of ENERGY STAR, Americans nationwide saved \$16 billion last year on their utility bills, while eliminating greenhouse-gas emissions equivalent to 27 million cars.) With Congress now back from summer recess, and students back from theirs, rising energy costs and dwindling state coffers are going to force tough sacrifices at the expense of our children’s education. Just imagine our schools going to a four-day week because energy and utility bills leave them no choice. Rather than wait for Congress to act, local leaders should embrace the savings already within their reach through the power of behavioral change guided by proven people-based energy conservation programs.

Our nation’s schools cannot afford to wait — and for once, there is a solution that both Republicans and Democrats can fully embrace.

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