INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF GREEN SCHOOLS

THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

In June 2010, I retired from the Head-Royce School in Oakland, California, after 26 years as head of school, capping a 40-year career in public and private education. I then set out to develop an “encore career” to promote environmental sustainability in our schools. Like Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century, I planned a yearlong journey to study the environmental movement in our K-12 schools, and I have written my reflections along the way. Greening America’s Schools is my account of the best practices I discovered and the environmental education movement that today is inspiring teachers, administrators, students, parents, and a broad group of supporting organizations to grow more sustainable schools for the future.

There is no more important and challenging task facing our nation than to embrace environmental sustainability. The problems we face are huge. And a host of recent books about the environment, with titles like David Orr’s Down to the Wire and J.F. Rischard’s High Noon, suggest that finding solutions to these problems is urgent. In Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, policy analyst Lester Brown describes four interrelated challenges before us: continued population growth, resulting global poverty, environmental degradation, and climate change. As daunting as these challenges appear, Brown is hopeful that we can address them
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with a concerted and well-orchestrated approach. I, too, am optimistic that we can do this.

The role of schools and environmental education is vital to this effort. With over 132,000 K–12 schools nationwide that enroll over 55 million students and employ nearly 4 million teachers, the impact of environmental sustainability initiatives can be very significant. At this moment, many of the nation’s schools are models of unsustainability — they operate inefficiently, generate large amounts of waste, provide poor environmental quality and nutrition, and produce a large carbon footprint. By promoting energy efficiency, strengthening academic engagement and achievement, and improving health and nutrition, we will develop global citizens who can lead the movement toward a more sustainable world. Our students can’t wait; this is their future. And as educators know, our students’ optimism, energy, ability to learn, and capacity for change are inspiring. It is to our students that I have dedicated this work.

IN SEARCH OF GREEN SCHOOLS

I devoted the 2010–2011 school year to better understand the K–12 environmental sustainability movement; identify gaps, needs, and challenges; and suggest opportunities and ways to advance the field. My primary focus has been to study approximately 50 independent and public schools in the K–12 sector and to write their stories. I also visited a number of colleges and universities; several “informal” environmental education organizations, including museums, science centers, and outdoor education programs; and a number of local, regional, and national organizations and their conferences across the country, all of which are playing a vital role in K–12 environmental education. Having spent 34 years as a teacher and administrator in two independent schools — Head-Royce School and San Francisco University High School — I studied a majority of independent schools for a number of reasons: the relative ease of access, the leading role many independent schools are taking in sustainability work, and the fact that the independent schools’ innovative culture has enabled them to embrace sustainability.

As a public school product myself and as a longtime advocate of the public purpose of private schools, I have included representative public schools in recognition of the fact that they educate 90 percent of our youth, and I plan to expand my focus on sustainability in public education. Although I have focused my initial study on schools in the United States, in the future I will study the growing international green schools movement.
My journey this year has taken me to New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, the South, the Midwest, and Southern and Northern California. While I have tried to be geographically representative, I have also had to select places to visit based on available time and resources. In the future, I will visit more schools in the Midwest and include schools in the Southwest and Northwest. Since I have pursued my study as a journey—and not as a more formal academic evaluation—my findings are necessarily preliminary and cannot do justice to the broad environmental education movement. Nonetheless, I hope this story will be of value to schools across the country that are in the process of becoming greener.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

Based on my prior experience, extensive conversation with experts, and an intensive literature review, I focused each of my site visits on the following questions:

- **Commitment:** What is the school’s vision for environmental sustainability? Mission, strategic plan, goals, objectives? Why is the school committed to environmental sustainability?
- **Leadership:** How is the environmental initiative governed? Who are the leaders? How is the program organized and staffed and with what resources? What is the board’s role?
- **Programs:** What are the school’s noteworthy programs? Energy and resources, healthy environment, ecological curriculum, nutritious food, community practices?
- **Impact:** What are the reasons for the program’s success? How is it evaluated?
- **Challenges:** What obstacles have emerged (financial, behavioral, resources, other), and how has the school overcome them?
- **Future plans:** What is next for the school? How will the program’s continuation be ensured?

**DEFINING KEY TERMS**

Embarking on this study required that I define several key terms: “Environmental education” and “environmental literacy” are main themes, and terms like “environmental,” “movement,” “ecology,” “environmental science,” “sustainability,” and “green” are important in understanding the larger context for the environmental education movement in schools. While Chapter 4 presents a detailed discussion of what makes a green, environmentally sustainable school, the following key concepts informed my study.