



School Sustainability Leaders Summit: Days Two & Three

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Note: This blog was originally posted on the [Verdis Group blog](#).

I'm on the plane headed home from D.C. after a torrid and invigorating few days at the USGBC's School Sustainability Leaders Summit. My mind is simultaneously racing and completely at ease. Yes, I know that sounds a little impossible. Let me explain.

Mind Status: Racing **Why: Opportunity Overload?**

I just finished reading my copy of "The Impact of School Buildings on Student Health and Performance," which sheds light on the critical need for research around how the school building impacts the health and performance of the students in those buildings. Once I finished, I flipped to the back cover and started doodling. Doodling turned to mind-mapping about the 2012-13 school year at the Omaha Public Schools, and an hour or so later the graffiti on the back cover completely took over. Here's what it looks like now:

It's all pretty clear, right? Yeah, um. Maybe not.

The conversations at the Summit were so rich that I'm having trouble really zeroing in on what is most important for us to tackle first. Actually, that might not be true. The hard part is deciding what to leave on the bench. In a school district as big as OPS (50,000 students), there is much work to be done, and I couldn't be more thankful for the opportunity I enjoyed the last few days with some great green school thinkers and doers. I'll be spending the weekend revisiting my heavily-doodled white paper and thinking about refining our plan for the next twelve months. I suspect my mind will be racing all weekend.

Mind Status: At Ease **Why: We're on Track**

We have been working with the Omaha Public Schools since this little dream of a company became a reality in July, 2009. The district's sheer size meant we had the opportunity to have a big impact right out of the gate, and I'm happy to report the results have been good.

Over the last three years we've developed an Energy and Sustainability Action Plan (the vision), created a quasi-governance structure with key focus teams, activated change agents in pretty much every school, removed barriers, measured results, provided feedback and recognition, and kept everyone reasonably focused. In essence, the steps the district has taken the last three years align nicely with much of what was informally outlined the last few days. In other words, we're on track.

While I was in DC, [Patrick McAtee](#) sent me and the rest of the team the most recent version of the graph below, which plots OPS' district-wide average ENERGY STAR rating versus the district's rolling 12-month energy costs for the last few years. More good news.

The district-wide ENERGY STAR rating has climbed 15 points since hitting the low point in September, 2010. Relatedly, financial savings related to energy costs have piled up as well. Thanks to the efforts of many, many people across the Omaha Public Schools, great results are being achieved, and we are immensely happy that we've been able to work with such a great partner in OPS.

The strategies we've been implementing for the last three years not only align with what green school experts like [Dr. Jennifer Cross](#) and [Dr. Brian Dunbar](#) recommend, they're working. And that puts my mind at ease.

[It's Time to Make the Doughnuts](#)

While the results have been great thus far, we're not resting and are not satisfied. We still meet new opportunities every time we walk around a corner. It's not much of a surprise, really. In a school district this size, there are always going to be ways to improve. We're particularly interested in how we can engage students in a more meaningful way in 2012-13. That's a tough nut to crack, but it was an overriding theme at the Summit and I can't get it out of my head: engage the students, tie to curriculum, engage the students, tie to curriculum. It's a mantra I'm taking to our upcoming planning sessions. We'll see where it goes from there.

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