



School Sustainability Leaders Summit: Day One

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

I'm in Washington, DC for a few days this week attending the School Sustainability Leaders Summit. It's a three-day focused discussion on greening K12 schools hosted by the United States Green Building Council's Center for Green Schools, and I am really excited to be representing the [Omaha Public Schools](#) and [Verdis Group](#) while here.

The first day was very much intended to build some rapport amongst attendees (there are just over 40) and establish a foundation for the discussions that will be held on days two and three. One of the first things that struck me about my fellow attendees is that they are all so intensely passionate and excited about the work they're doing. It was inspiring to hear all of the achievements that many schools and school districts have accomplished, and I'm looking forward to getting into the weeds on a few projects that piqued my interest (students doing energy audits, revolving loan funds, city-wide coalitions, etc.).

We went through an exercise where each attendee wrote two achievements, two visions, and two barriers on post-it notes and then stuck them on the wall. Once organized into categories, a brief discussion ensued where people offered observations. The crux of our conversation was actually focused around the idea of culture change and how to move a school district towards a culture that embraces sustainability.

It's not much of a surprise, at least in my mind, that so many were having such a difficult time getting it done. It's hard and complicated. In my view, there are a few keys to making it happen:

- Leadership Commitment. It's a must and if it's not there, having a meaningful sustainability program is immensely difficult. Success may occur in the short-run, but in the long-term it will likely fizzle.
- Tie Sustainability to Student Achievement. Let's not kid ourselves, school administrators, teachers, staff and students are (or should be) primarily focused on one thing: student achievement. In order to have a successful green schools initiative, everything happening must lead towards, at least in some way, student achievement. I appreciated the fact that Rachel Gutter, Director of the the USGBC's Center for Green Schools, offered this issue in her introductory remarks. We have anecdotal stories, but we need unequivocal data that makes the connection.
- Quick & Measurable Wns. Several attendees suggested that their initial efforts were somewhat covert in that they didn't necessarily ask for permission from senior leadership. They identified and pursued an opportunity, achieved success, and then leveraged it to earn a commitment from leadership and others. It's a good strategy, but the key is not only achieving the win, but measuring it so that it is easier to "make the case" when the time comes.

All in all it was a really good start to what I'm sure will be a great few days. I already have a healthy list of ideas to bring back to Omaha, yet we've only been together for half a day. Hopefully my head doesn't explode before the remaining two days conclude...although if it does, I think it would be a good sign.

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