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My Job Inspiration: The Wisdom of Kids

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One of the best parts of my job is getting to listen to kids and their visions for the world and their place within it. It's reinvigorating, energizing and inspiring. It reminds me that when we provide safe and inviting places for kids to learn, grow and be creative, we directly impact how the world works right now and what it will be in the future. In the past two weeks, I've had two opportunities to soak in the wisdom of kids.

The first was when Farah McDill, our Green Schools Fellow in Sacramento, put together an event for her "Project Green" teams to present ideas for the use of $5M in reallocated bond funding. Teams of students, supported by dedicated teachers like our "Coolest Teacher" Kim Williams, presented proposals to a panel of judges and the Superintendent on daylighting, native plants, rainwater catchment systems, energy efficiency upgrades and much more. Project Green is the first time we at the Center have ever seen the pairing of capital planning and student-led proposals.

Beyond the incredible grasp these students had of environmental concerns, I was happily surprised by the depth of research and connection between the proposals and core learning objectives in math and science. Superintendent Raymond actually pulled me aside in the middle of the presentations to wonder out loud at the strong, clear connection between what the students had learned – budgeting, labor and material costs, advanced calculations of tank volume and pipe length, total area of window replacement, weight of skylights – and state standards.

While the event in Sacramento was leading up to imminent school improvements, the experience I had this past week empowered students in a different way. It challenged them to think about the future. This was my second year as a jury member of the Council of Education Facility Planners International (CEFPI) School of the Future Competition. Six regional winning teams of middle school students are flown to D.C. to present and compete in front of a tough jury of 15 industry professionals. These kids never fail to knock the jury's socks off.

The two top teams, one from Alaska and one from Arizona, together provided a beautiful snapshot of what environmental sustainability could look like in the future. The team from Teeland Middle School in Wassila situated their school on a reclaimed and remediated landfill to save the wilderness that they've seen their town gobble up over the last several years. They researched advanced green technology, biophilia, wind coefficients and acoustics – an incredible assortment of topics for such a young group.

The final team to present was Imago Dei Middle School outside of Tuscon. Even with these kids' difficult financial and family backgrounds, they had decided to propose a school for a group that never had access to a “green” school. They researched the history, culture and climate of Niger and designed a low-tech sustainable school – with both a permanent and mobile component – to serve the students in a rural town there. They explored creative construction materials, place-appropriate architecture and passive design. I found these students' care in creating this school for students in another corner of the world incredibly moving, and I know my fellow jury members felt the same.

Over the last two weeks, I've seen what happens when we give kids the freedom and power to tell us the present and future they want to see. The wonderful thing that happens when we give them this power is that the world automatically looks more promising. Schools are clean and healthy, daylighting comes into classrooms, water is purified through anerobic digestors, landfills are used to power a building, students are invited to explore the world around them, and mobile schools serve students in Africa who can't travel to school. The world looks a bit brighter, kinder and smarter.

Andrew Metzger

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