USGBC Orange County Looks To Refine the Green Classroom Concept

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One chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council is taking a first step in a wide-scale classroom "greening" project for public K-12 schools nationwide.
By Bridget McCrea
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Intent on increasing the number of green classrooms in California's K-12 schools the Orange County chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) is retrofitting a Costa Mesa classroom that it hopes will serve as a model for a more widespread, national effort.

The Davis Magnet School classroom will be gutted, insulated, and equipped with high-performance lighting that "harvests" daylight, environmentally friendly flooring and furnishings, wireless submeters (for monitoring utility usage), and a new ventilation system. All paints and finishes used during the process will have high recyclable contents and low levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs).

Wendy Rogers, chair of the USGBC [Orange County's] green school committee and a design principal at integrated design firm LPA Inc. in Irvine, CA, said the retrofit is being funded through in-kind donations. "So far we've had very good support from the contractor and business community in the area," said Rogers. "We're pretty optimistic about the project based on the number of people who have told us that they want to get involved with it."

Rogers said she hopes the classroom retrofit will raise awareness of the value of environmentally friendly classrooms in a county where just seven schools in 38 total public school districts are considered green. "That's pretty good, but we know that we can do better," said Rogers. "We want this model to demonstrate energy savings and sustainability in a way that makes other school districts get involved with similar projects."

Davis Magnet School was selected based on the work that the K-6 institution was already doing to create a greener campus environment. "The school has gardens; the students and teachers use composting; and the classrooms are oriented in a way that will allow us to take advantage of natural sunlight," said Rogers. "Those elements came together to create the right environment for a green classroom project."

Positioned next to a conventional classroom, the retrofitted space will be used in an experiment that compares energy usage between the two rooms. Rogers said the retrofitted version will serve as an "active environment" where pupils will learn how to measure HVAC loads, monitor utility usage, and understand the importance of simple moves like turning off the lights before leaving an empty room.

Rogers said the USGBC [Orange County] is currently wrapping up the funding for Phase I of the project. That phase will include the installation of the wireless submeters, lighting fixtures, and plug-load controllers. This equipment will be in place by the end of the year and will enable monitoring of both the retrofitted classroom and the conventional space.

Construction on the retrofitted classroom is expected to commence when school releases in June and wrap up by the start of the 2012-13 school year. "We're hoping to have everything in place by the time the students come back at the end of August," said Rogers, who is bullish on the USGBC [Orange County's] ability to meet that deadline based on the progress and financial support received thus far. "I've never seen a project resonate as significantly as this one in terms of consensus and support."

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