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Opening Session at Green Schools National Conference Shows Strong Support for Healthy, High Performing Schools

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The 2012 Green Schools National Conference kicked off today with the opening session, featuring inspiring words from green schools advocates such as Andy Kerr, Colorado state representative and a member of our Green Schools Caucus; Majora Carter, president of the Majora Carter Group and USGBC board member; Laura Turner Seydel, Chair of Captain Planet Foundation; Gary Hirshberg, chairman of Stonyfield; and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Secretary Duncan spoke mainly about the Department of Education's Green Ribbon Schools, and made mention of the Center's hard work on the program. He proudly stated that "green schools are saving green," and programs like Green Ribbon Schools set a high bar for schools that are hoping to become more sustainable. He mentioned schools like Rosa Parks Elementary, Pine Jog Elementary and Casey Middle School that are all taking bold steps forward in their green school efforts through LEED and other means. He also stated that green schools don't have to be new schools, but that "any school can take simple steps to be greener and promote environmental stewardship." It was great to see such a strong champion like Secretary Duncan speak so favorably about the benefits of green schools, and we are excited to continue our work with the Green Ribbon Schools Program.

Earlier in the event, Andy Kerr announced that tomorrow, he will present a bill to the Colorado legislature that will help ensure that all students attend healthy, high performing schools. Rep. Kerr also mentioned all of his great work with the Green Schools Caucus.

Rep. Kerr introduced Majora Carter, who spoke eloquently about non-school factors, and how they can influence student learning. Majora spoke about how through her work, she has learned that people who have access to green schools have lower stress levels, have improved performance in schools and have higher self-esteem. She also discussed an idea of "crime prevention through environmental design," which has proven that the more people are outside, the less crime there will be. Majora said that if community members are in outdoor spaces that are healthy and that they enjoy, naturally, less bad things will happen in those areas. Majora closed her speech with the quote "we cannot afford to be complacent about the future of our country," encouraging audience members to take action in greening their schools and communities.

Our good friend and Center for Green Schools advisory board member Jayni Chase introduced Laura Turner Seydel, who through the Captain Planet Foundation is helping to get grants to build gardens at schools. Laura also made mention of the Center's hard work, along with the USGBC Georgia Chapter.

Other champions Gary Hirshberg stated that "schools can become nourishing sources of health" and Graciela Tiscareno-Sato, author and advotate for green schools in the Latino communities said "I'm not calling for education reform, I'm calling for expectation reform."

Overall, the event was a great, and attendees left feeling inspired on next steps they could take to green surrounding schools and communities. Stay tuned for lots more information from the conference, and don't forget to follow us on Twitter and Facebook for updates!

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