Green Schools Regional Roundtables: Common Ground in Kentucky

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On Nov. 29, 2011, state legislators and key decision makers from six states across the South and Midwest convened in Bowling Green, Kentucky, to discuss the political common ground around the topic of green schools. Led by the bipartisan co-chairs of the Kentucky Green Schools Caucus, Representatives Jim DeCesare (R) and Mary Lou Marzian (D), the event took place at Richardsville Elementary School, the nation's first net-zero energy school.

Richardsville Elementary provided the perfect backdrop of cost-savings and bipartisanship to highlight the success and best practices of the green schools movement that lawmakers could apply to their own communities. The school serves a 78 percent free and reduced lunch population and was constructed at comparable cost to other elementary schools within the Warren County School District. To date, the green schools movement in Warren County has saved more than 6 million dollars – enough money to preserve more than 160 teacher positions.

The day started off with a tour of the school led by students, to show off some of the many features Richardsville Elementary has that makes it energy-efficient and environmentally-friendly. Students showed the legislators how their school tracks real-time energy usage, their recycling hallways and features such as solar tubes, lighting panels, their geothermal energy system and their infamous "combi ovens," which use steam to cook foods, while at the same time reducing the cost of heating the kitchen. Their tour ended in the cafeteria, where legislators were invited to join students and eat lunch featuring local produce and steamed french fries from the combi-oven (author's comment: they were crispy and delicious).

The legislators spent the rest of the day discussing how other states across the country can adopt policies and practices similar to Kentucky that promote high-performing school buildings. With active support from the USGBC Kentucky Chapter, the Kentucky legislature has unanimously adopted a resolution to form a Green Schools Caucus and passed legislation that encourages green construction standards for schools in the Bluegrass State.

After the discussions, the lawmakers traveled to Western Kentucky University for the LEED Gold plaque ceremony for the new Gary Ransdell Hall.

Based on the success of this event, the Center for Green Schools at the U.S. Green Building Council will launch a series of similar summits in 2012, bringing elected officials from across the political spectrum together to explore the common ground around green schools. These dialogues will be supported by USGBC's extensive national network of chapters. We're looking forward to working with the Pennsylvania USGBC Chapters to host our next summit this spring. Stay tuned for more details!
To bring the green schools movement to a mainstream audience, it's imperative that political leaders work collaboratively to provide our children and our communities with the best opportunities to thrive. At the end of the day at Richardsville, South Carolina Rep. Doug Brannon (R) succinctly summed up what he had learned about green schools: "All day I've been looking for a why-not, and it's clear to me there isn't one."

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