"Everything is Bigger" for the USGBC Central Texas-Balcones Chapter's Green Schools Movement

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Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose. This is the mantra of the Emmy-winning television show Friday Night Lights, epitomizing the spirit of a fictional high school football team in this Texas-based drama series. These six words embody the can do – the must do – attitude of people in a small town, trying to do what's right for their families and their community. After a recent visit to the Lone Star State, for the USGBC Central Texas-Balcones Chapter's Green Schools Symposium, it occurs to me that attitude goes beyond the small screen, and far beyond football, and is at the heart of what many Texas communities are doing to bring better schools to their students.

Led by its volunteer Green Schools Committee, the Chapter's fourth annual Green Schools Symposium brought together teachers, administrators and green building professionals for a day of learning, networking and inspiration. This year's event was held in San Antonio's North East Independent School District's (NEISD) first LEED for Schools Gold certified project, Cibolo Green Elementary. The project team was on hand to describe how pursuing LEED certification at Cibolo enabled the district administration, design and construction teams to collaborate on implementing the school's sustainability goals, leading to major payoffs almost immediately. In addition to integrating symbols and lessons of the LEED credit categories into their curriculum and throughout the hallways, Cibolo Green finished out its first year with an annual energy cost of $0.78 per square foot (electric and natural gas) - the lowest of any of the district's 69 schools, and $0.38 below their elementary school average.

With that in mind, Cibolo was the perfect setting for a day full of valuable lessons in team work, environmental literacy and healthy schools. Seventh grade science teacher Loryn Windwehen shared stories from her school garden at NEISD's Harris Middle School. With her seventh grade Green Team and the afterschool Junior Master Gardeners Club, more than 50 students maintain the school's vegetable and flower garden each week. Whether they're having a class outside or just passing through for a moment in the Texas sunshine, the entire community is reaping the benefits of the garden. Students in Loryn's classes learn about water conservation, soil types and plant cycles from their hands-on work in the dirt, and about nutrition and health from the vegetables they're growing and sharing (and actually eating!).

The Symposium was the culmination of another opportunity I had to work with the Texas Chapter this fall, when I served on the jury for their 2011 Green School Awards. Each year the chapter recognizes schools that have incorporated best practices into build healthy and high performance buildings. According to Denise Shaw, the chapter's green schools committee chair, "each year the projects submitted are more and more comprehensive in their approach to the design and construction of green schools in our state. This award allows us to showcase the projects that continue to set the bar higher on designing Texas green schools." In the end, the jury selected Gloria Marshall Elementary School in Springs, TX and the University of Texas at Dallas Student Services Building as the winners from the ten incredible submissions.

Needless to say, Texas is so much more than football. Both the Symposium and the Awards are great examples of the growing commitment in the region to better serve the students, the tax payers and the environment. If everything is bigger in Texas, that's certainly true for the green schools movement!

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