Green Buildings and Healthy Kids

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What do health and green building have in common? Perhaps more than you would think. Public health researchers and green building professionals around the country are forging new relationships and working together to better understand the relationship between design and health. Currently, much of the work in this arena is centered on obesity prevention, where frameworks such as Active Design are rapidly connecting research to practice.

The Center for Green Schools is critically engaged in the evolving conversation. Last week, the Center co-hosted a workshop that brought together leading designers, researchers and educators to identify opportunities for the integration of health issues, sustainability and green building practice. Green Health: Building Sustainable Schools for Healthy Kids was sponsored by The National Collaborative for Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR), The National Academy of Environmental Design (NAED) and the Center for Green Schools.

The first day focused on opportunities to promote physical activity and healthy eating in school environments. Sessions looked at three different intervention scales—the school neighborhood, the school yard and the school building—each through a multidisciplinary perspective. On the second day, attendees examined new research and measurement tools and explored ways to increase the capacity for green health research and practice.

I was delighted to hear Dr. Matt Trowbridge kick off the proceedings on Thursday morning with the proclamation that “design matters.” This, I realized quickly, was my kind of workshop.

The same day, I participated in a session focused at the building scale. Using images from our firm’s Manassas Park Elementary School, I attempted to illustrate how design strategies connect children to nature and encourage them to stay active throughout the school day. My colleague Dina Sorensen followed my brief presentation with an overview of our Buckingham County Elementary School, explaining how we have partnered with a pediatrician and public health researcher to re-think the school food environment in a way that promotes healthier eating habits.

For me, the highlight of the workshop was a presentation by Adam Brumberg of the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab. Adam explained how a keen understanding of behavioral economics can dramatically affect the choices that students make as they move through a school lunch line. You can see an amazing video demonstration of this on Cornell’s Smarter Lunchrooms website.

As I reflect on the dialogue of last week, I realize that one of the recurring themes of the workshop was the need to more rapidly disseminate the emerging evidence to designers and decision-makers. Fortunately, USGBC and the Center are well-positioned to fill this need, and I am confident that USGBC will continue to function as a robust hub that collects and connects a diverse set of voices.

The workshop left me inspired by the amazing work being done by my fellow attendees. And it left me feeling the urgency of our shared commitment to green schools within a generation. Thanks again to everyone who helped make the two days a success!

Steve Davis

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