

Americans Care About Green Schools

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Written by [Rachel Gutter](#)

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As a former teacher, I've seen first-hand the transformative effect that great educational environments can have on teacher motivation, student performance and community engagement. I also know that parents are unfailingly dedicated to their children's education and will do just about anything to give their kids an advantage in life.

Over the past year, we at the Center for Green Schools have witnessed thousands of volunteers, educators, school administrators and policy makers transforming our nation's schools into inspiring places where children learn and thrive. 2011 was a landmark year for the green schools movement, so you can imagine that it was tough to whittle down the long list of accomplishments to 10 big wins. But we did.

Today the Center, along with its founding sponsor, United Technologies Corp., released its "Best of Green Schools 2011" list, highlighting these 10 leading states, cities, districts and decision makers that have gone above and beyond in their efforts to ensure every student has the opportunity to learn in a healthy, safe environment. With the Best Of list, we celebrate schools and regions from across the nation – from K-12 to higher education – for their commitments to measurable and innovative sustainability initiatives and their contributions to the Center's mission to green every school in America. This year's recipients ranged from federal collaborations to individual school victories. Here's a taste of trailblazers who rose to the top of our list:

Best Moment for the Movement, U.S. Department of Education, Green Ribbon Schools

Green Ribbon is the first comprehensive and coordinated federal initiative to focus on the intersection of environment, health and education. In my mind, this program is the biggest thing to happen to the green schools movement, ever. To date, 33 states and the District of Columbia have signed on to participate.

Best City, Philadelphia, PA

The Philadelphia School District and its community partners have made amazing progress in 2011 toward the greening of their 291 public schools. The district has a commitment that all new schools certify to LEED Silver and has been rolling out a plan to address the city's existing schools. This year, Kensington Creative and Performing Arts High School – a Title 1 school where 90 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch – made AYP for the first time after moving into the district's first LEED Platinum facility.

Best Collaborators, Kentucky

State Representatives Jim Decesare (R) and Mary Lou Marzian (D) led their colleagues in the Kentucky General Assembly to unanimously adopt a series of resolutions in support of green schools and have encouraged their legislator peers in other states to replicate their efforts to work across party lines. Last month, Jim and Mary Lou invited bipartisan group of decision makers from six states around the region to visit the nation's first net-zero school and discover common ground on the topic of green schools. I was there to see that common ground wasn't hard to find – who doesn't support healthy, high-performing schools that educate healthy, high performing students?

The Best of 2011 list comes on the heels of a third party, nationwide survey we commissioned earlier this year, which revealed that one third of Americans think that the majority of U.S. schools are in "poor shape." Moreover, 90 percent of respondents indicated that the condition of our nation's schools is no better than adequate. The same survey revealed that Americans see school modernization as a high-priority investment. And despite what Congress would have us believe, nearly three out of four Americans support federal investment in school building improvements focused on creating healthier learning environments, saving tax dollars or lowering carbon emissions.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office reports that at least 25,000 U.S. schools are in need of extensive repairs and more than 10,000 of those schools have air that is unfit to breath. On the flip side, research has shown that, on average, green schools save \$100,000 per year on operating costs. Greening our schools just makes sense and our hats go off to this year's designees for their practical and forward thinking.

At the Center for Green Schools, we view the greening of America's schools as an imperative, and think that no elementary, middle, high school or higher education institution should be left behind. Whether it's finding out if your state is participating in Green Ribbon, convincing your school board to implement sustainable practices or teaching your kids to turn off lights and recycle, join parents around the country who are getting engaged and working to transform the way we design, build, operate and maintain our schools.

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