

# Myths About Energy in Schools

The following pages take a look at some of the myths and misconceptions about energy in schools, and provide the facts that can help school districts make smart energy choices. Around the country, many school districts are already proving that energy smart building choices can significantly reduce their operating costs and, at the same time, create better places to teach and learn.

## **Myth 1: Energy isn't a major budget item for schools.**

**Fact:** Not so. In many school districts, energy costs are second only to salaries, exceeding the cost of supplies and books. Nationally, K–12 schools spend more than \$8 billion a year on energy and, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, at least a quarter of that could be saved through smarter energy management. Energy improvements could cut the nation's school bill by \$2 billion each year.

There are a wide range of ways to improve existing buildings and build smarter new schools. One example, daylighting, is a particularly cost effective option. According to the Sustainable Buildings Industry Council in Washington D.C., the average middle school that incorporates daylighting will likely save tens of thousands of dollars annually—and improve student performance at no extra cost.

## **Myth 2: Schools can't save much by being energy smart.**

**Fact:** Not so. Changes in behavior alone—such as turning off lights in unoccupied rooms and turning off computers at night and on weekends—can save an individual school thousands of dollars every year. Even vending machine lights can make a difference: Seattle School District saved \$20,000 a year by turning off the lights in its 250 vending machines. The PowerSave Schools program, managed by the Alliance to Save Energy, has partnered with over 1,000 schools since 1996 to save more than 50,000 Megawatt Hours of electricity and \$6 million dollars. Many of these schools realized savings simply by improving building operation and changing everyday behavior. The changes weren't hard or complicated—mostly common sense.

Mahtomedi Public Schools ISD 832 educates 3,100 K–12 students in four schools in the northeastern Twin Cities metropolitan area. The district partnered with the Schools for Energy Efficiency program and used ENERGY STAR® support and resources to develop low- and no-cost strategies for improving energy performance. As a result, Mahtomedi ISD 832 has assessed the energy performance of all its schools and made improvements, such as lighting retrofits, that have helped realize avoided costs of more than \$268,000.

## **Myth 3: Energy efficiency is unrelated to student performance.**

**Fact:** Not so. Evidence is growing that energy efficient schools can provide learning environments that lead to improved student performance. In part, the link between smart energy use and improved learning is intuitive. If lighting quality is poor, students can't read the board; they can't hear teachers over noise through leaky walls and windows; and they can't concentrate if they're roasting or freezing in classrooms with poor temperature control.

In addition, studies have shown that daylighting—an integral part of most new energy efficient schools—may have a positive effect on student attitudes and performance. One study by Innovative Design, an architectural firm in Raleigh, North Carolina, concluded that students attending daylit schools for two or more years scored 14 percent better on tests than students in non-daylit schools.

## **Myth 4: Energy improvements in existing buildings require major upfront investments.**

**Fact:** Not so. Fortunately, financing options such as energy savings performance contracts and lease-purchase programs allow schools to make improvements with little or no investment. With performance contracts, an energy services company (ESCO) pays for the energy improvements, and is paid back over time through the utility

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bill savings the project creates. The National Association of Energy Service Companies (NAESCO) has a list of qualified ESCOs (see [NAESCO.org](http://NAESCO.org) for more information). To ensure that an ESCO provides the best mix of energy measures, get an outside expert to review its proposal. Some companies provide this service for free or at a low cost for schools.

With lease-purchase programs, schools make payments each month and own the equipment at the end of the contract period. This is an increasingly popular approach for schools engaged in building improvements as well as bus purchases.

Many districts are taking advantage of these types of financing options. For example, the Duxbury, Massachusetts, school district joined forces with an energy service company, NORESCO, to design and build an energy efficient retrofit that also addressed a serious indoor air quality problem. The resulting \$2.7 million project, financed by a third party brought in by NORESCO, is being paid for by the school district under a ten-year shared savings contract. During the ten-year contract period, NORESCO guarantees Duxbury an energy cost savings of \$271,900 per year, provides ongoing maintenance, and measures the school district's energy use to verify continued savings.

## **Myth 5: New schools are energy efficient.**

**Fact:** Not so. Unfortunately, this often isn't the case. Unless a school directs its architect to design highly energy efficient buildings and they are operated in an efficient manner, new schools may be as inefficient as some old ones. Or they may incorporate only modest energy efficiency measures. Well-designed schools are properly oriented on their sites to take maximum advantage (or provide relief from) the sun. They use windows, walls, lighting systems, heating and cooling systems, and other elements that are efficient and well-integrated. And they allow areas of the building to be shut down when not in use, among other energy-smart features.

During the rush to construct new buildings, schools often focus on short-term construction costs instead of long-term, life-cycle savings. The key to getting an energy-smart and well-designed school is to ask for an energy efficient design that exceeds state energy codes in your request for proposals (RFP). Schools need to select architects who are experienced in making sure that energy considerations are fully addressed in design and construction.

## **Myth 6: Constructing an energy efficient school costs more.**

**Fact:** Not so. Total construction costs for energy efficient schools are often the same as costs for traditional schools, even though individual building features may cost more. The reason is simple: efficient buildings leak less air and take better advantage of the local climate. Therefore, their heating and cooling systems—among the most expensive aspects of buildings—don't need to be as extensive to provide comfort. In many cases, schools can pay the same price to construct an efficient building and pay much less to operate it year after year after year. And even when construction costs are higher, energy savings can pay for additional upfront costs very quickly—sometimes in less than a year.

The energy efficient design for Durant Road Middle School in Raleigh, North Carolina, resulted in reduced construction costs as well as reduced operating costs. Not only does this school save tens of thousands of dollars in energy costs each year, but the decision to decrease the size of the cooling and electrical systems saved \$115,000 in construction costs in 1996. Daylighting—combined with a radiant barrier on the roof that reflects the sun's heat—lessens the cooling load about 30 percent below that of a conventional school.

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## **Myth 7: Designing energy efficient buildings takes more time.**

**Fact:** Not so. The design process for an energy efficient building is slightly different but not necessarily more time consuming. The process is less linear—design documents don't just go from architect to engineer to subcontractors, with each adding information at a specific stage. Instead, all of these professionals work closely together from the beginning to ensure that the building's systems are fully integrated with each other and with the structure.

## **Myth 8: Tracking energy use isn't necessary.**

**Fact:** Not so. As school administrators in Utah found out, understanding how energy is used can help schools identify energy waste and equipment problems, as well as overcharges and errors on energy bills. Through careful tracking, five Utah school districts uncovered thousands of dollars in utility overcharges. In 1997, Jordan School District uncovered \$93,000 in credits for one high school alone.

Once school personnel know their buildings' energy consumption rate, school districts can provide incentives for reducing consumption through tracking. Careful monitoring of school energy use led Philadelphia's school district to cut its utility costs nearly \$7 million annually for seven years. These savings are reinvested in educational or recreational programs in each school.

## **Myth 9: Local communities won't support energy improvements.**

**Fact:** Not so. Energy efficient design for schools can be a selling point in bond elections because energy improvements translate to more comfortable classrooms for students, reduced energy bills, and lower operating and maintenance costs. Communities across the country have recognized the benefits of energy-wise design. In Montpelier, Vermont, for example, more than 300 volunteers from the community supplied labor to construct two new classrooms with natural daylighting, good ventilation, and energy efficient design to create a positive learning environment.

## **Myth 10: Help is hard to find.**

**Fact:** Not so. Help is available through programs at the national, state, and local level. State energy offices provide technical assistance and grant programs. Utilities and energy service companies provide expertise and resources to reduce energy consumption. These resources range from financing for new construction and retrofits to technical assistance and instructional materials on energy.

More and more school districts are finding ways to utilize resources from the business community as well. Under Michigan's SolarSchools program, for example, six Detroit Edison commercial customers are partnering with ten southeastern Michigan school districts. Each participating school receives an annual credit toward its electric bill of 2,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity from a solar electric facility. The credits are donated to the schools by their business partners. In addition, Detroit Edison developed curricula on solar and renewables for grades 4-6.

For more information and ideas to help your district take strategic advantage of available resources, visit [keepprogram.org](http://keepprogram.org) or call 715.346.4770.

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