

Weaving Sustainability Personnel into Education

Strategies for increasing sustainability education in your district by focusing on personnel.

By Richard Weeks



Visitors to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., may have had the opportunity to watch curators painstakingly care for our country's original flags. As curators stitch new thread into centuries-old fabric, their mission is not to create something new but to preserve and ensure the survival of something very old.

In her book *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*, American philosopher Elizabeth V. Spelman writes about our need to fix broken things, from disabled cars to fractured relationships. It is in our nature,

she says, to try to ensure the survival of things after they have degenerated from their ideal state.

Maybe that's why many of us can relate to sustainability education—it places students in the forefront of saving the planet. Visionary administrators, activist parents, and crusading students are pressing school boards to address environmental concerns by adding sustainability employees to district payrolls.

Table 1 identifies some of the sustainability employees in today's schools. The list includes long-standing certified and nonlicensed staff positions that have been

TABLE 1. School Sustainability Employees

Position	Responsibilities
Certified	
Superintendent, deputy superintendent, assistant superintendent	Reports to local board of education; is often a catalyst who starts school environmental sustainability programs; in smaller districts, may manage operations and sustainability programs
Director of curriculum and standards	Supervises department heads and coordinates sustainability and environmental education programs
Sustainability coordinator	Oversees school or district sustainability efforts
Science teacher	Teaches school board or state-adopted Next Generation Science Standards
Nonlicensed	
Director of operations	Administers health and safety, building security, and numerous sustainability tasks in addition to managing building, grounds, maintenance, and repair technicians
Energy manager	Manages energy efficiency projects in school buildings, including HVAC, lighting, mechanical, and weatherization retrofits; supervises building automation systems, controls, maintenance, and repair technicians
Engineer	Leads capital asset replacement and improvement engineering team
Environmental health and safety manager	Provides support for environmental compliance, waste management, and pollution prevention; coordinates composting and recycling programs
Resource conservation manager	Works to reduce district's energy costs through conservation efforts and renewable energy systems; tracks energy performance
School garden coordinator	Manages gardens at numerous school sites; collaborates with school environmental science teachers on student projects and volunteer neighborhood gardening clubs; supervises distribution of produce to neighborhood food banks

tasked with additional responsibilities related to sustainability. Successful school environmental sustainability programs depend on two additional classes of individuals: contract workers and parent volunteers.

Here are some strategies for increasing sustainability education in your district by focusing on personnel.

Appoint a Sustainability Coordinator

Sustainability coordinator is currently the preferred title for many certified and nonlicensed sustainability personnel. A science teacher may be offered a stipend to function as sustainability coordinator in addition to performing regular classroom duties.

All 56 schools in Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington, Kentucky have sustainability coordinators. New York City Public Schools has adopted the same model.

The science teacher at P.S. 333, Manhattan School for Children, and her counterpart at Rosa Parks Elementary School in Lexington are site coordinators responsible for facilitating their schools' sustainability initiatives and managing the "Green Teams," which include students, parents, and community partners.

The coordinators monitor the schools' compost, recycling, and wellness plans in addition to writing grant proposals. They ensure that their custodial staffs are engaged and supportive of recycling and energy efficiency (e.g., turning off lights) and have an active part

in planning school events to promote sustainability and wellness, such as Arts and Science Day and Earth Week.

As K–8 classroom science teachers, supervised by their principals, they guide students in presenting year-end projects based on protecting the planet; they also participate in the "Adopt-a-Tree" and "Farm to School" programs.

Alternatively, many districts have opted to hire one sustainability coordinator to work with all their schools, reporting to the director of operations. The coordinators view their mission as promoting the three pillars of sustainability: environmental literacy, building efficiency, and student wellness.

As district employees, they establish and maintain effective working relationships with a variety of stakeholders, administrators, consultants, government officials, nonprofit representatives, and community partners. The coordinators are responsible for developing and updating five-year sustainability plans, including managing all projects associated with the plans. They manage the schools' behavior-based energy conservation programs, conduct energy waste audits, provide guidance and training for new programs, and recommend curriculum resources and grant opportunities. Coordinators design and maintain the Green Team website and other social media communication.

Although many coordinators may not be certified personnel, this is not to infer they are not professionals. Their

diverse backgrounds might include graduate degrees and work as county extension educational coordinators.

Expand the Operations Department

Using effective cost–benefit analysis, school business officials have been able to demonstrate how key positions not only can pay for themselves but also can produce considerable savings for their districts. As a result, school districts have expanded or established new positions in their operations departments.

Smaller districts with modest means have created the energy manager position to augment the operations director’s duties. In larger districts, the responsibilities warrant hiring resource conservation managers and environmental health and safety managers. Qualifications for these jobs vary, with some personnel holding advanced engineering or environmental science degrees.

Energy managers work to reduce the district’s energy costs by targeted efficiency projects, including heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning (HVAC); lighting; mechanical; and weatherization retrofits. They plan renewable energy systems, such as solar energy; establish energy-purchasing partnerships with regional educational collaboratives, such as New York’s Boards of Cooperative Educational Services; and ensure that districts receive energy-saving grants and rebates from

utility providers. They oversee energy, water, and waste contracts and provide billing analysis for the district procurement officer.

Building resource-monitoring systems have provided simplified energy use data for reporting by the energy manager. The programs are installed in school buildings with sensors attached to HVAC units or water, gas, electricity, and solar energy panels. Reports can be generated in real time to alert managers to malfunctioning systems and current energy consumption. The director of operations should be expected to establish proficiency goals for energy, conservation, health, and safety managers.

Recruit Sustainability Personnel

With the encouragement of school business officials, districts can ensure that the mending process continues by recruiting trained and experienced sustainability personnel. The three pillars of sustainability—environmental literacy, building efficiency, and student wellness—can be linked to every line item in a school’s operating budgets.

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