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Kids design a sustainable future: A model curriculum for teaching sustainable in schools

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Each year, the USGBC awards a Legacy Grant as a gift to the city that hosts Greenbuild, its annual international green building conference and expo. Greenbuild Legacy projects are nominated by the local host committee and approved by the USGBC. They are financial awards to important local initiatives that are focused on sustainable design and the use of the LEED rating system, but also relevant to the host community and of broad and lasting value.

In 2008, for the first time, the USGBC's Legacy Grant to the Greenbuild conference host city is being combined with a legacy grant for the American Institute of Architects' 2008 AIA Convention to jointly fund a single local initiative. As this was the first time the two conventions were held in the same city - Boston - both conference host committees were presented with a unique opportunity to coordinate and leverage these grants to fund a joint project.

As Boston is the center of a metropolitan region renowned for its excellence in education, the funding of a local educational initiative was given primary consideration by the local Greenbuild host committee. The Boston Society of Architects' committee on the environment (BSA COTE) was also considering funding an educational initiative as part of a legacy grant associated with the AIA Convention. The Greenbuild host committee and the BSA COTE leadership met in November of 2007. An alliance was formed between the two organizations and a single benefactor was identified. Learning By Design in Mass. (LBD:MA) is a private, non-profit, statewide organization dedicated to giving young people the skills and opportunity to communicate their ideas about their built and natural environments, their community, and themselves. To do this, LBD:MA has developed curricula and teacher development programs that have introduced interdisciplinary design thinking and methodologies into K-12 classrooms. LBD:MA, a BSA-sponsored educational initiative, had just begun to investigate the subject of sustainable design when approached by COTE and the Greenbuild host committee. They eagerly agreed to participate as the partner organization for both grants.

In May of 2008, LBD:MA hosted a visioning workshop in conjunction with the AIA Convention to kick off a three-year effort to craft a flexible, interdisciplinary, standards-based sustainable design curriculum for students in grades 5-8 initially, and, ultimately, K-12. This initial workshop brought design professionals and educators together to develop a common language and promote mutual understanding of the core principles of sustainable design. A two-day follow-up workshop in August gave educators and designers an opportunity to collaborate on an integrated design project, address questions of curricular application and integration, and tour high-performance buildings.

At this point in the process, some principles for the curriculum (with the working title "Kids Design A Sustainable Future") have emerged. Envisioned as a holistic, systems-thinking approach, students within this program would develop an understanding of the inter connectivity between the

constructed and natural environments, define sustainability on a personal level, and then engage in hands-on activities synthesizing, imagining, and representing their ideas for the built environment. As the dimensions of a model curriculum continue to develop, LBD:MA will host another workshop in November associated with Greenbuild with the near-term goal of having a pilot curriculum ready for test implementation in Spring of 2009. It is anticipated that a core group of educators and design professionals will continue to work with LBD:MA, the BSA, and the USGBC through 2010 to monitor implementation and report on the organization's progress. It is hoped that this Legacy Project will soon become an influential teaching tool for Boston-area schools and beyond, ultimately becoming an inspirational sustainable design education model for Massachusetts and the nation.

Credits: Greenbuild Host Committee: Jacquelynn Henke, LEED, co-chair (Harvard University Allston Development Group) Phoebe Beierle, co-chair (The Green Roundtable)

Greenbuild Host Committee Legacy Subcommittee: Michael Davis, AIA, LEED, director (Bergmeyer) Rebecca Owens, LEED, chair (VHB/Vanasse Hangen Brustlin)

Project development team:

Chin Lin (HMFH); Phillippe Genereux (SMMA); Michael Stack (Anshen + Allen); Galen Nelson (Boston Redevelopment Authority)

BSA COTE: Ken Fisher, AIA, LEED, co-chair (Gensler) Dan Arons, AIA, LEED, co-chair (Architerra)

Learning By Design in Massachusetts: Jan Ham, program director Polly Carpenter, AIA, associate program director

With help from: BSA; The Boston Architectural College; The Green Roundtable; USGBC Mass.Membership Forum.

Michael Davis AIA, LEED AP, is vice presiden Bergmeyer Associates, Boston, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540