



School Board Advocacy Toolkit

Promoting green schools for all students

This toolkit is a living document and is intended to be viewed on an internet-connected device. Resources are linked throughout the document. Please reach out to schools@usgbc.org with any questions or feedback.

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Introduction

Every day in the U.S., more than 50 million students and 3 million teachers attend class in over 100,000 public school buildings — many of which are out-of-date and in need of repair. At the Center for Green Schools at the U.S. Green Building Council, we promote green schools for all, because where we learn matters. We believe all students should have the opportunity to attend schools that sustain the world they live in, enhance their health and well-being, and prepare them for 21st century careers. You have likely sought out this resource because as a parent or community member, you hold the same beliefs as we do and understand that solving challenges we face—such as global climate change, air and water quality, biodiversity, and more—begins with our young people and their schools.

Local school boards have a tremendous role to play in the success of our schools and students, so we've developed this resource to make school board advocacy more approachable and actionable. You have an important voice and unique perspective to contribute, whether you are a parent, student, educator, or other community member. To become green schools, your local schools need your support, input, and creativity.

What do we mean when we talk about advocacy? In general, advocacy is an opportunity to use your individual and collective power to support a cause or policy. It is the action you take to express your beliefs and knowledge to create change.

We hope this toolkit supports you in the following ways:

- Build your knowledge and confidence on the basics of green schools.
- Build your awareness of how your school board works and make decisions.
- Help you identify a specific green schools issue to champion (if you don't already have one in mind) and equip you with clear actions you can take.
- Equip you with resources to communicate with and persuade your school board and others.
- Help you make local school boards more aware of the importance of green schools, actions that can be taken, and specific policies that could be implemented.

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How to use this toolkit

Use this document as a reference guide when you want to approach your local school board about a school sustainability issue. It is formatted to follow the basic steps you might take in an advocacy effort.

Links throughout and within the appendices provide additional resources, examples, and templates.

If you have any questions, reach out to schools@usgbc.org for assistance.

1 - THE BASICS

Build your knowledge about green schools, your confidence in communicating their value, and your familiarity with how your local school board works.

Why are green schools important?

Green schools are better for students, teachers, and communities. They teach students how to lead a changing world, and they support student understanding by modeling sustainable behavior through green operations and building practices. Green schools strive to achieve success in three pillars ([visit this resource](#) for more details):

- Reduced environmental impact and costs
- Increased health and well-being
- Increased environmental and sustainability literacy

Although twenty percent of America attends school each day, schools face falling budgets, outdated facilities, and environments that compromise health. Research tells us school buildings—an overlooked component of quality education—impact concentration, retention, alertness, and health of students and teachers alike.

Communicating the importance of green schools to school boards

According to the [National School Board Association](#), school boards are responsible for representing the public voice in education and providing citizen governance for what schools need and want. They set the standard for achievement in a school district and should be available and accountable to the public for the performance of schools. They are there to ensure that you, the taxpayer, get the most for the tax dollars that go into your local schools.

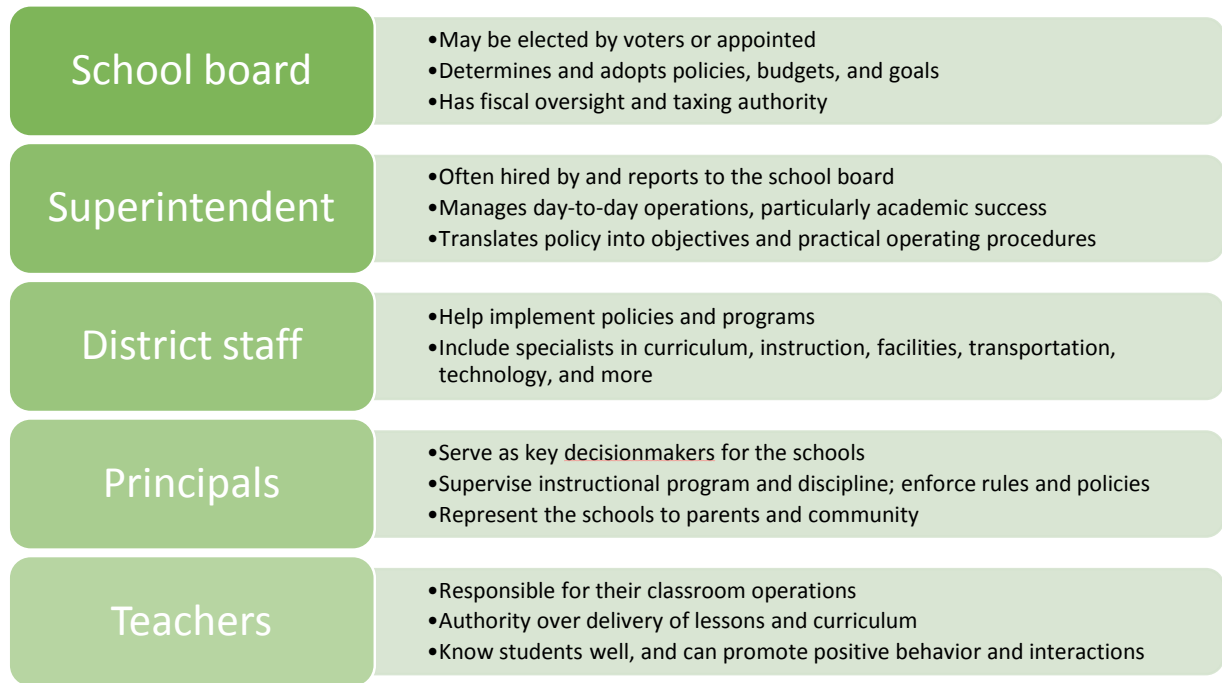
An advocacy effort aligned with the school board's mission--educating the students--will have the best chance at success. The board members are there to serve your community's interests, so do not be intimidated about using your voice. Greener schools can contribute directly to the educational and operational objectives they are accountable for—they just might need you to bring the issues to them and make the link to a quality education clearer.

Become familiar with the school district's vision statement and the basics of its strategic plan so that you can connect green schools to their stated goals. Also, ground your appeal in a way that makes the connection direct and beneficial. For instance, public schools rely on average daily attendance rates to receive federal funding, so attendance is of particular importance. However, students in America miss approximately 14 million school days per year because of asthma ([U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)). Controlling exposure to indoor air contaminants, such as carbon monoxide, dust, and pollen, could prevent more than 65% of asthma cases among elementary school-age children ([American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine](#)). By taking action to improving indoor air quality, schools can improve the health of students, faculty and staff, potentially reducing absenteeism and thereby qualifying for more federal funds.

For more examples of how green schools benefit teaching, learning, budgets, and more, visit the [talking points links](#) provided in the Resource section of this toolkit.

School boards & other decision makers

This graphic summarizes the roles and responsibilities of actors in a local school district. The specifics may vary depending on where you are, so we encourage you to refer to your school district website for more locally relevant information. This toolkit is oriented toward school board advocacy, but it is important to understand (and potentially engage) others impacted by the policymaking process:



Other stakeholders

Your district might also have various **committees** that support and guide district policies and practices on specific issues. For example, many school districts have wellness committees that are responsible for making recommendations to the school board. Other districts have citizen-led committees that make recommendations to the school board on curricular content areas. Visit your school district website for more information on committees.

You may also have a Sustainability Manager in your school district. This person's role is generally to progress sustainability initiatives and policies around the topics of energy and water conservation, renewable energy, environmental health, waste minimization, sustainable purchasing, and sustainability curriculum. This position often serves as a bridge between the facilities and curriculum departments, and works closely with community partners to leverage resources and support for various sustainability programs. If you have a Sustainability Manager in your district, they could be a strong ally and source of information for your advocacy efforts. Check your school district website or contact the district to ask if there is anyone working on sustainability.

Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) work to address issues that are important to parents, teachers, and school administrators. They may support the school by organizing projects or raising funds, and sometimes there is even a green focused committee of the PTA. Find your local PTA through your local school district website or by visiting the [National PTA's state-by-state directory](#).

A note about charter schools: Charter schools are independently run outside the traditional public school system and can be exempt from many state and local rules, policies, and regulations. Their charters must be approved by a public entity, which is often a local or state board of education. In most states, charter schools are required to be 501(c)(3) nonprofits, which require public disclosures of financial information. The charter school's supervisory board has authority over school finances ([National Charter School Resource Center](#)) and may hold regular meetings open to the public. If you are working with a charter school, we advise you to visit your charter school board website and become familiar with their communications and meeting procedures.

2 – GOAL SETTING

What problem do you want the school board to address? Advocacy is most effective when you identify a specific problem you're trying to solve. If there is a pressing problem you already intend to focus your advocacy efforts on, this toolkit will help you organize around it. If you do not have something already in mind, here are some options you may want to focus on, categorized using the [3 pillars of a green school](#):

Pillar	Issue
Reduced environmental impact and costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Green school construction requirements or funding Waste management, recycling, and composting Renewable energy
Increased health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing toxins in the school environment Green cleaning
Increased environmental and sustainability literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring that graduates are environmentally literate Increasing standards-aligned sustainability content in the curriculum

What specific action would you like the board to take? **Make your goal SMART:**

- Specific: state exactly what you want to accomplish.
- Measureable: quantify or suggest an indicator of progress.
- Achievable: make sure it can be realistically achieved, given available resources.
- Relevant: make sure it is in line with the board's broader goals.
- Time-bound: specify when the result should be achieved.

Be sure you're in alignment with the overall goal of quality education and/or your district's strategic plan as noted above in section 1.

Gather information and formulate your approach

- Check your school board's website for board policies that will help you understand your next steps. Information to look out for may include:
 - Existing facilities and/or green school operations policies
 - Existing policies relevant to your advocacy issue of choice
 - Bylaws on developing, distributing and maintaining board policy
 - Procedures for communication and/or presenting to the board
 - Recent meeting minutes to see if relevant conversations have taken place
- If a school board policy exists on the topic you've chosen, but the policy is clearly not being acted upon, request a meeting with the relevant school district staff to understand what might be getting in the way.
- Talk to allies, relevant local non-profits, and other parents or community members, as described in the section below.

- Collect information about best practices related to the issue.
- Research whether other districts/schools in your state have made progress on this or a similar issue by searching for recent news articles, asking local non-profits who may know the topic well, and by contacting the Center for Green Schools

3 – BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A collective voice can have greater impact. Connect with other parents or community members. By talking to others, you'll get a better sense of what the general opinion is around the topic you've chosen to focus on and how you might be most successful in addressing it.

If it is a fairly new issue for the school/district, an informal or less structured approach may be best in order to get it on people's radar. If it's a persistent problem that community members have tried to resolve in the past, a more organized campaign may be needed. If it makes sense, you may want to organize a task force or committee.

Identify and connect with allies

Who else should you work with or speak to? Ask around for teachers and parents who may be passionate about the issue you've chosen to focus on. Search for non-profits who are experts on the topic and who can advise on best practices.

Your superintendent and school principal can be important allies with powerful voices, so gauging their feelings early will be important. They should be able to provide institutional knowledge and context on what relevant policies already exist, what has already been tried in the past, and more. Additionally, the superintendent and school principal would be charged with the implementation of the policy if it is adopted by the school board, so any insight they can share about how to approach the board will be valuable.

USGBC has local staff and volunteers around the country who work toward greener buildings and communities in their own backyards. To discover a USGBC community near you, visit [the USGBC directory of regions](#). To find out if there is a green schools committee near you, contact the Center for Green Schools by emailing schools@usgbc.org.

Revolutionizing school food in Boston

At Boston Public Schools, a group of parents became involved in advocating for change within the struggling school food department. They worked to form a committee to help select a new Food Service Director as well as draft the new food service RFP. Their efforts demonstrate the impact that an organized group of parents can have on district-level change and accountability. Read [this story](#) from CityLab to learn more.

Involve the students

There is power in student participation and leadership on school issues. They spend most of their time in these schools and have the most at stake. Students will also have the most powerful stories to tell about how these issues impact them, and they can contribute a different energy and creativity to your efforts.

The [Green Apple Day of Service project ideas list](#) can provide inspiration for student-led activities with an advocacy focus. Earthforce—an organization that promotes meaningful youth engagement—is a good source of information on [what student voice is](#) and [ways to engage students](#) in advocacy.

The power of student leaders

At Congress Elementary in Grand Rapids, MI, 6-year-old Milo Kraegel channeled his love for the environment into a sustainability campaign at his school.

Milo started a letter writing campaign in his class to get rid of polystyrene trays in the cafeteria. He also made presentations to the other classes about the problems with polystyrene, getting nearly the entire school to write letters to the Director of Nutrition Services petitioning for a more environmentally friendly option. Milo asked for a meeting with the Director and hand-delivered the letters in a shoebox. As a result, trays at Milo's school were switched out, and the Director is working closely with the district's Sustainability Manager to figure out how to do the same for the rest of the schools in the district.

See local coverage of Milo and his Earth Saving Club [here](#).

4 – DECIDE ON A COURSE OF ACTION

When it comes to the point of taking action and communicating with your school board, we encourage you to proceed in the manner you think is best. You can keep it simple or get as creative as you want!

If you're unsure of how to start, below are **three possible actions** you can take once you've identified your goal. These actions can be progressive and complementary, or be taken separately depending on the situation.

Write to the board

Send a brief (one-page) email or letter about your issue to individual members. Include the following information:

- Who you are
- What you are writing about
- Why this issue matters, including a brief personal story showing how it affects you/your family/your student
- 2-3 main points supporting your argument
- What specific action are you asking them to take?
- A personal touch, if possible (specify any community or business connection to them; did you vote for them?)

This action can be taken at the individual level, together with a group, or even as a larger campaign involving student participation. If students are involved in the effort, this could be a great avenue to get creative, particularly with younger students.

We have included a [template letter](#) in the Resources section that you may use as an example.

Speak at a school board meeting

School board meetings are open to the public and a good opportunity to raise your issue with the board as a whole. Before you plan to speak, you may want to attend a meeting and observe to familiarize yourself with the order of business. When you're ready, follow these steps:

- Reach out and ask to be included on the agenda to present during an upcoming school board meeting. The procedure for putting an item on the agenda can vary. We recommend checking your district school website, where you should find contact information for the district office. Ask how much time you can have to present and if you will be able to use visual aids.
- Ask other supporters to be present at the meeting to demonstrate to board members that there is wider support around the policy
- At the meeting, be prepared with succinct talking points outlining the problem, information you've gathered, and action item/proposal for the school board. When you speak, make sure to emphasize what specific action you are asking them to take.
- Leave them with hard copies of your materials.
- Leave the door open to continue the conversation. Don't worry about knowing the answer to every question they may ask, as it can be a good opportunity to offer to follow up with a more detailed answer.

A note on policies vs procedures

To adopt a new **policy**—a general statement indicating a desired condition, direction, or belief—a school board will usually take a formal vote during a public meeting, which community members have the right to attend. A **procedure**—or method for implementing a policy—may then be developed by the superintendent and/or school district staff to put a policy into practice. You will want to follow up to make sure your advocacy carries through to the implementation stage.

If possible, offer to schedule a separate, dedicated meeting or individual meetings on the issue for board members, to give a more detailed presentation on the issue. We have also included a [template presentation](#) in the Resources section that you may use to draft a visual, detailed argument. It will be good to prepare and share a few concise slides with the board, regardless of whether you are given a chance to present it in person or not.

Prepare a sample policy for the school board

It will be most effective to prepare suggested policy language when accompanied by a school board presentation or meeting. A sample policy should:

- Make clear the purpose, as well as what is being asked or directed.
- Define any key terms.
- Clarify the audience and establish responsibilities.
- Leave off details about implementation. Feel free to make suggestions, but these details will be decided on by the appropriate staff and/or leaders in the school/district, and they will be incorporated into the policy if appropriate.

In the [Resource section](#), we have included a [general policy template](#) as well as a collection of real policies focused on various issues (facilities design, recycling, indoor air quality, etc.) that have been adopted by school boards across the country. You can reference these real examples as you draft a sample policy for consideration.

Leverage social media for your advocacy efforts

Social media is a great way to offer quick information and updates about your advocacy issue or activities. It's also an excellent medium for sharing events with a wider audience, celebrating successes, and thanking people for their support. Photos from events can make great social media content and draw more attention to your cause. We encourage you to amplify your advocacy message on social media and tout your milestone achievements.

Social media is not necessarily the place to answer every question, or get into deeper discussions. Decide what information is best shared on social media, and what would be better suited to an in-person conversation.

Leaders pay attention to social media

A student at MAST Academy in Miami, FL tweeted at her superintendent to celebrate their successful participation in Pepsi's Recycling Rally. She also used the opportunity to urge the district to deal with its poor-performing recycling vendor. The superintendent responded promising to enhance the district-wide recycling program, and parents and students at the school plan to follow up with him to make sure that in the future the vendor is able to recycle bottles and cans.



Alessia Diez
@AlesssiaDiez

Follow

We won first place in the Pepsi Recycle Rally for our redesigned recycling program. We worked hard separating bottles and cans. We learned that the vendor does not recycle these items. Can you please assure that we will get a new vendor by August that collects bottles and cans?



2:38 PM - 8 May 2018 from Miami, FL

1 Retweet 7 Likes



2 1 7



Alessia Diez @AlesssiaDiez · May 8
#AskMiamiSup @MiamiSup ^^^ previous tweet

2



Alberto M. Carvalho @MiamiSup · May 8
Replying to @AlesssiaDiez
We will be enhancing the district-wide recycling program and launching an awareness and education campaign. #AskMiamiSup

1 1 7



michele drucker @mdruc · May 8
That's great to hear! Please, please get a vendor that recycles bottles and cans so our students can continue to participate in the Pepsi Recycle Rally. We should have mixed recycling. \$30,000 in Whole Foods labels were wasted last year b/c the vendor only recycles cardboard.

1

5 – FOLLOW UP

Whichever course of action you decide to take, be sure to leave the door open to continued dialogue. Provide board members with your contact details, obtain clear guidance on next steps and timing, and follow up accordingly while respecting the timeline that has been laid out.

You may not receive a clear reaction from the board the first time you raise your issue, and if you do, the reaction may be hesitancy. If this is the case, be ready to ask follow-up questions to get more insight into the board members' thinking, and use that information to adjust and make your proposal stronger over time.

Drafting and adopting/amending policy, even at a local school district level, takes time. In many cases, school boards are required to provide the general public with an opportunity to review and comment on the policy before they can vote on adopting it. Be patient throughout the process, and try to focus on building relationships, trust, and continued education around the issue even when it seems like things may not be moving forward.

6 – CELEBRATE AND SHARE YOUR STORY

Keep in touch with us! We want to support you throughout your advocacy efforts, and celebrate your successes by amplifying your story.

This is a living document and we will need your feedback to make it a more useful resource over time. Write to schools@usgbc.org to let us know how you're using this toolkit, if you have any questions about additional resources available, or to tell us how your advocacy work is going.

APPENDIX: RESOURCES

COMMUNICATIONS

About green schools	Talking points to equip you in communication about green schools from a variety of perspectives - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a green school? • Green schools are better for teaching • Green schools are better for learning • Green schools are better for budgets • Green schools are better for communities • Green schools are better for the planet • Myths and facts about green schools
School board email/letter template	Use this letter template to draft your outreach to school board members about the issue.
Editable presentation slides	Use this slide deck template to compile your presentation. It suggests a structure to your talk and provides visual aids describing relationships between the school environment and student health and performance.

POLICY TEMPLATES AND EXAMPLES

Sample policy template	Customize this sample district sustainability policy template to suit your needs and suggest a policy to your school board.
General sustainability policy examples	<p>Environmental Sustainability Policy (from Boulder Valley School District, CO)</p> <p>School & School District Sustainability Policy Templates addressing environmental ethics, recycling, energy management and resource conservation, business practices, and more (from Oregon Green Schools Program)</p>
Policy examples relevant to Pillar 1: Reduced environmental impact and costs	<p>Sample Green Building and LEED Construction Policy (from Arlington Public Schools)</p> <p>Sample Green Facilities Design Policy (from Dayton Public Schools, OH)</p> <p>Sample Energy Conservation Policy (from Fairfax County Public Schools, VA)</p> <p>Sample Recycling Policy (from Fairfax County Public Schools, VA)</p>
Policy examples relevant to Pillar 2: Increased health and well-being	<p>Sample Water Policy and School Water Quality initiative (from Boston Public Schools, MA)</p> <p>Sample Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Policy (from Cherry Hill Public Schools, NJ) including toxics and pollution reducing options</p> <p>Sample Indoor Air Quality Policy (from Derby Public Schools, CT)</p> <p>Sample Green Cleaning Policy (from Trumbull Public Schools, CT)</p>

Policy examples relevant to Pillar 3: Increased environmental and sustainability literacy

Sample [Sustainability Policy](#) (from [Baltimore City Public Schools](#), MD) including environmental literacy definitions and [standards](#)

Standards for [Environmental Teaching in the Classroom](#) (from [Arlington Public Schools](#), VA)

ISSUE SPECIFIC TOOLKITS FOR SCHOOLS

School recycling toolkit

This [toolkit](#) from the [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency](#) provides step-by-step guidance to get a recycling program organized and operating.

Energy efficiency student toolkit

This [toolkit](#) from [EPA's ENERGY STAR](#) provides tools and resources to start or enhance a school energy management program.

ADDITIONAL READING AND REFERENCE MATERIALS

How LEED is working for schools

Refer to the [LEED Schools brochure](#) and [LEED for schools fact sheet](#) for overviews of how LEED can be used in schools.

View this [Class of 2017 article](#) and [slideshow](#) to see how LEED-certified schools across the country are improving environmental health and sustainability literacy for their students.

How school boards work

The National School Board Association (NSBA) provides information about [what school boards do](#) and how to [take action through advocacy](#).

How school buildings impact student health and performance

For more research to support your message, see [Schools for Health: Foundations for Student Success](#) by Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health. It reviews findings from over 200 studies to show environmental exposures in schools impact health and performance.

The [Impact of School Buildings on Student Health and Performance](#) report provides an accessible account of research connecting school buildings with student health and performance.

How policy and legislation impacts schools

Our [Green Schools Menu of Options for State Legislators](#) provides examples of state-level policies under each pillar.

This [State-level Legislation to Support Energy Efficiency paper](#) examines the effectiveness of legislation that has provided direct funding to school districts to implement energy efficiency measures.

This [Perspectives on Implementation and Effectiveness of School Green Cleaning Laws paper](#) examines 11 states' green cleaning laws and analyzes data and opinions on their effectiveness. Relatedly, this [green cleaning module](#) will help you to begin planning a green cleaning program for your school or school district.

The [December 2017 issue](#) of the Green Schools Catalyst Quarterly is dedicated to policy. It includes a summary of state-level policies related to all aspects of green schools, and a piece on how Camden City School District in New Jersey restored its recycling program (find it [here](#)).