



Understanding Green and Sustainable Schools Terms

If you have been wondering what a “*green school*” or a “*sustainable school*” REALLY is, you are not alone. And if you think you do know, it’s likely that the next person you discuss the topic with will have a different understanding. While these terms are used often, there is not a common understanding as to what they mean.

Green vs. Sustainable

We don’t view “*green*” and “*sustainable*” as interchangeable terms, though they often are by others. Typically “*green*” efforts consider only part of a system, involve only environmental aspects and focus only on short-term goals. To become a “*sustainability*” effort, the scope would expand to consider the whole system and the interconnected aspects of environment, people and economics, using long-term thinking.

Why the difference matters: If negative impacts are only reduced as is often the objective of “*green initiatives*”, but not eliminated, then the ultimate goal of sustainability will never be achieved. Green initiatives can be a great way to get started, but sustainability solutions sometimes require an entirely different approach. Only a sustainability strategy that strives to eliminate negative impacts systemwide can result in the ultimate goal of health and resources for all, for generations to come, even as our global population increases.

Terms

School: The term “*school*” usually refers to an individual public, charter or independent school. Sometimes a generic use of “*schools*” is intended to include at least the school district or perhaps the school system in general.

Green School: A school that considers itself or is considered by others to be a *green school* is typically at least striving to reduce its resource use. Some are doing considerably more to reduce their environmental impacts with efforts that include several of the areas listed in our K-12 Sustainability Topic Matrix (see back of page). Some may also be considering social and economic impacts, and may even satisfy the definition of a “*sustainable school*.” Support from the central district departments is often limited or completely lacking, which limits progress.

- Additional meaning: A school might be designated or certified as a *Green School* as part of its participation in one of several state-wide Green School organizations or programs. The requirements of each program vary. Some of these programs focus only on resource conservation and others are broader.
- Yet another meaning: *Green school* is frequently used to refer only to the physical building, and clarity is increased by using “*green school building*.”

High Performance School: Used by some to refer only to the facility. Others specifically select this term because they feel it refers to more facets than just the building.

Sustainable School / District: Some programs and organizations use the term “*sustainable school*” to refer to schools fitting one of the above descriptions. However we utilize a comprehensive understanding of sustainability in use internationally.

A school / district will be sustainable when it has the systems in place to:

- Provide all its graduates with the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values to create a sustainable future (Education for Sustainability), and to
- Manage its activities such that they result only in positive or neutral social, economic and environmental impacts¹, locally and globally for current and future generations.

The **Journey Towards Sustainability** is one of continuous learning and improvement which ultimately leads to a change of individual and organizational thinking involving all aspects of the school / district.

¹ As defined by the Natural Step System Conditions or equivalent sustainability framework.

Visit our website to learn about the components that enable a sustainability journey.

Sustainable Oregon Schools Initiative: <http://www.sustainableschools.org/>

An individual public school receives central district services that affect the scope and longevity of its sustainability program, therefore ideally the central district departments are involved at a core level with any sustainability effort. In the case of a self-contained independent or charter school, the school itself provides the central services, so it is functionally similar to a small school district

K-12 School and District Sustainability Topics

The topic matrix lists a set of topic areas that are particularly relevant to sustainability efforts within a school or school district. It is being used by some districts as a framework to guide their district-wide sustainability effort. Eventually principles of sustainability become integrated into all school and district activities.

Big sustainability issues such as Climate Change and Children’s Environmental Health involve multiple topic areas, but are not in themselves all-encompassing.

Category	Topic Area	General Topic Area Issues
<i>POLICY & PLANNING</i>	Integrating Sustainability	Making efforts permanent; Policies, systems and frameworks to guide progress toward sustainability
<i>EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY</i>	Education - Content	Content and standards for sustainability, Instructional material formats, Student preparation for post-K12
	Education - Delivery	Pedagogy, Curricular & Extracurricular options, Student interaction with facility and operations
	Staff Education & Training	Sustainability training and education for all school / district staff
	Community Involvement	Volunteers, Internships, Partnerships, School outreach to community, Community support to school
<i>FACILITIES AND OPERATIONS</i>	Buildings	Siting, New construction, Renewal/adaptation of existing buildings, Building operations and maintenance
	Grounds	Natural areas, Landscaping design & maintenance, Learning gardens, Parking areas, Play areas
	Indoor Environment	Indoor environmental quality (air quality, temperature, lighting, views, acoustics), Chemical management (pesticides, cleaning, lab, other)
<i>RESOURCE MANAGEMENT</i>	Procurement	Sustainability of goods and services, Product stewardship, procurement infrastructure; Bulk and cooperative purchasing
	Energy	Amount and source of all energy used.
	Water	Water to and from facility (domestic and natural)
	Material Resources	Source, Waste prevention, Reuse, Recycling, End of life
	Human Resources	Staff recruitment and hiring, Benefits, Sustainability orientation, Staff diversity
	Financial	Funding, School fundraisers, Investments, Endowments
<i>SYSTEMS AND SERVICES</i>	Food & Wellness	Choices and sources of foods, Farm to school, Wellness
	Transportation	School buses, Operations vehicles, Vehicle maintenance shop practices, Alternative transportation options for staff and students
	Communication	Internal & external, Sharing & collaborating on the sustainability effort

Visit our website to learn about the components that enable a sustainability journey.

Sustainable Oregon Schools Initiative: <http://www.sustainableschools.org/>