


Students, you can bring a change

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A recent architectural challenge for me was to design a school that was around the theme of sustainability. The brief was to create an environment to support new educational paradigms that make children more responsible for their actions, and spark awareness about their inter-connectedness with the planet and society. The assignment meant more than winning a certificate or plaque from an accrediting agency for a building.

It was to provide healthy spaces conducive to learning that engage even young minds in an eco-friendly way. Sensitivity to holistic sustainability or reciprocity can be cultivated both through experiential knowledge of new physical environments and by conventional pedagogies. These complementing approaches seem true for an existing school aspiring for a new institutional ethos, as well as for a campus coming up on a green field site.

Most green rating agencies have a unique way of benchmarking school designs with global sustainable standards. Apart from focusing on the typical parameters for any rating system such as site planning, water efficiency and energy conservation, they also rate performances on toxin free indoor air and green education. Toxin free indoor air quality is dependent on the school's initial design, the construction materials and methods, daily operations and lifetime maintenance programs. Paints, carpets, whiteboard markers, art supplies and other materials with low VOCs have been specified. The air conditioning system is of materials that inhibit mould growth, and air filters that prevent the 'sick building syndrome' have been incorporated.

Daily maintenance is planned with eco-friendly cleaning products only, and pesticides used on campus shall be safe for the children and the earth.

Perhaps the real game changer and commitment to being green will come through student engagement. Classrooms are intended to support information technology driven distance education in science, language and mathematics; as well as programmes on nature friendly living and eco practices.

Physical activities are to include outdoor treks along nature trails and visits to parks; as well as fun assignments in the school garden or a living lab. Social work is part of the overall development programmes. Hands-on environmental projects that involve the local community and socioeconomic problems at the school itself are some of the ideas. Sustainability concepts are integrated into student assessments during times of open houses or parent teacher interactions.

One of the biggest struggles for a mother is getting her child to eat a healthy diet. Immersive software like Fooya! help kids learn about the importance of healthy food choices and sustainable lifestyles subconsciously, even as they play a video game on iOS or android devices. Some parents demand that such niche sustainability life skills become a part of this school's education.

There are several strands of evidences which point towards the importance of play in a child's development, and the value of an extended period of playful learning before the start of formal schooling. This seems intuitively true for education on environment and sustainable living.

It may be a small inclusion or a sea change in current school habits. Meaningful design of spaces will influence children become great green citizens. Now, isn't this a fascinating commission?! Game on!

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