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Those 'Green' Schools You Hear About Aren't So Green After All

By Anastasia Swearingen

Once again, results from the Programme for [International Student Assessment](#) show that American students are falling behind their international counterparts. As we struggle to figure out who to blame for the U.S.'s continued dismal performance, we should consider the fact that America spends more per-pupil than any other country—but we're clearly not spending that money wisely. For instance, instead of spending more to hire great teachers, states are paying millions to a private entity to certify their schools are "green"—even if "green" certification is little more than a plaque on the wall.



English: The LEED sign at the entrance to a development. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Take Ohio for example. Back in 2007, the state mandated that all new public schools meet the standards set by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) for [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design \(LEED\)](#) certification despite the fact that the USGBC is a private nonprofit, not a government agency. The state has more schools certified by the USGBC than any other state and is celebrating its 100th Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified public school this week.

Buckeye taxpayers have paid for LEED certification with an extra \$131 million to school construction costs. Perhaps this wouldn't be such a big deal if LEED's certification lead to more efficient buildings. But LEED's certification requirements do little to encourage greater water and energy efficiency.

To earn LEED certification, a building does not have to prove that it meets a particular efficiency standard. Rather, LEED-certified buildings only have to meet certain energy and water standards based on computer models of expected building usage. If, after the building is occupied, it grossly exceeds its projected energy or water use, it will still maintain its LEED certified status.

In short, a builder just has to make promises, not keep them, in order to

secure LEED certification.

Its unsurprising then that a recent analysis of building energy and water use in New York City found that LEED-certified buildings performed no better (and in some cases worse) than non-certified buildings. Similarly, in 2009, a study of LEED buildings by [Oberlin College](#) found that there is “no evidence that LEED-certification has collectively lowered either site or source energy for office buildings.”

The USGBC knows it has a problem—it’s admitted as much, noting that “Buildings have a poor track record for performing as predicted during design.” But that obvious limitation hasn’t stopped the USGBC from lobbying other states to require LEED certification for taxpayer-funded buildings.

To earn LEED certification, a building has to earn a specific number of points. But the system makes it easy to earn a host of points that have little or nothing to do with making a building “green.” For example builders can earn a point for adding a bike rack or two points for limiting the number of parking spaces to the minimum required by law. Because the point system isn’t weighted, a building can earn the same amount of points for eliminating parking spaces as it can for adding a renewable energy system.

The USGBC collects millions of dollars annually in certification fees. The General Services Administration, which oversees much of the federal government’s building construction, [estimates](#) that fees to the USGBC and to LEED consultants add about \$150,000 to the price of each new federal building.

So if LEED doesn’t make buildings more efficient, but eats up millions of taxpayer dollars, why are states across the country still requiring or encouraging schools to obtain LEED certification? Wouldn’t that money be better spend on teacher salaries or school supplies?

Four states have effectively banned new public buildings from seeking LEED certification and legislation pending in the Ohio General Assembly would do the same. The bill couldn’t have come at a better time—Ohio’s governor has proposed cutting \$1.8 billion from the next state education budget.

While ending the LEED-certification mandate won’t make a huge dent in the state budget holes, it seems wasteful to pour millions into LEED when we should be focused on improving classroom instruction and our ability to compete in the international community.

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