

U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools: Leadership Insights and Implications

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of Education established the Green Ribbon Schools recognition award (ED-GRS) in 2011 to inspire schools to strive for 21st century excellence by recognizing schools with exemplary practices that reduce environmental impacts and costs, improve the health and wellness of students and staff, and provide environmental education that incorporates STEM, civic skills, and green career pathways. This study examined the perspectives of 75 public and private school or district leaders that received the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools (ED-GRS) award to honor exemplary work in the area of environmental impact and costs, health and wellness, and sustainability and STEM education. The study provides insights to school and district leaders, as well as school community members who are striving to implement green efforts in their schools, regarding the leadership perspective on how best to pursue such efforts and the perceived benefits of the ED-GRS awards, such as student and community engagement, school visibility and fundraising, among others.

Environmental education has its roots in the late 18th and early 19th century with philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserting that education should include a focus on the environment and biologist Louise Agassiz encouraging students to “study nature, not books” (McCrea, undated, p. 1). Early “nature education” and “conservation education” movements gave way to the current environmental education movement that emerged around the first Earth Day and was codified in the National Environmental Education Act of 1970 (National Environmental Education Advisory Council, 1996). “Environmental Education is a learning process that increases people’s knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address these challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action,” (NEEAC, 1996, p. 1).

In the U.S., the “green schools” movement has emerged in the last 15-20 years as an effort to promote environmental literacy with the additions of having the school facilities and operations themselves embody the principles and practices of education for sustainability. This includes school campuses that save energy and water, reduce waste and exposure to toxins, serve healthy food, and provide access to gardens, green schoolyards and outdoor education and physical activity.

There is a growing body of evidence that schools that provide sustainable and healthy facilities and operations with opportunities for hands-on, experiential environmental education are

enhancing student academic outcomes and success, safeguarding the health of students and staff, and saving scarce funds while also reducing a school's environmental impacts. In response, numerous states and local communities, schools and districts have been pursuing a diversity of environmental education and green school efforts with support from myriad informal and non-profit education and environmental organizations, local and state parks, science museums, zoos, and aquariums, state departments of education, community volunteers, and other important supporters and stakeholders. However, there has been little consistency or standardization of these efforts.

In response to this growing green schools movement, the U.S. Department of Education – in keeping with its mission to promote student achievement and global competitiveness through educational excellence – established the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools award in 2011. The award is for schools, districts, and institutes of higher learning that demonstrate excellence in three “pillars”:

1. Reduce environmental impact and costs;
2. Improve the health and wellness of schools, students, and staff; and
3. Provide environmental education, which teaches many disciplines, and is especially good at effectively incorporating STEM, civic skills, and green career pathways (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Schools and districts must be nominated by state education agencies or higher education authorities, the Department of Defense Education, or the Bureau of Indian Education. Each nominating entity is permitted to nominate up to 5 pre-K-12 schools or districts. If a state or comparable authority wishes to nominate more than two schools or districts, at least one must serve at least 40 percent of students from a disadvantaged background, and if an authority wishes to make a fifth Pre-K-12 nomination, it must be a private school. Participation among states has been growing, with 30 states participating as of the 2014 awards. Not all states or authorities nominate their full quota (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

In its inaugural year 2012, the U.S. Department of Education recognized 78 schools with the Green Ribbon Schools award. In 2013, ED added an award for public school districts that meet the criteria, and recognized 78 recipients. And in 2014, 57 recipients were named, bringing the 2012-2014 total to 213 schools and districts combined for the three years.

Methods

This study examined schools and districts that were recipients of the 2012, 2013 or 2014 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbons Schools award. Seventy-five of the 213, or 35%, of the recipients responded to an online survey administered in the spring of 2014. Their results are outlined below. Descriptive statistics were used to provide summaries of the findings of the fixed-choice questions from the survey.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership perceptions of school leaders (principals, teacher leaders, or other stakeholders) who had taken initiative in applying for, and receiving the ED-GRS award in 2012-2014. Two broad research questions guided this study:

1. What are your leadership perceptions regarding the school sustainability efforts that were recognized by the ED-GRS award?
2. What benefits do you perceive regarding the ED-GRS award?

An online survey administered over a two week period provided researchers with the data used in this study.

Review of the Literature

The literature around green schools and environmental education highlight the benefits, costs, opportunities and challenges for enhancing student outcomes via the provision of healthy and sustainable physical learning environments and experiential and outdoor education. There is a parallel literature examining school leadership and community involvement and their impacts on student outcomes. The following three sections thus highlight each respective area.

The Three Pillars of a Green School

The core attributes of green schools have been developed during the last few decades in response to the deteriorating physical conditions of many American schools, the rising expenses associated with constructing and operating schools, the growing concerns about children's increase in obesity and lack of physical activity, and the increasing evidence that hands-on, inquiry-based environmental education enhances academic outcomes. According to research summarized in the 2006 Report "Greening America's Schools: Costs and Benefits," more than one-quarter of all American students attend schools considered below standard and the air is "unfit to breathe in nearly 15 thousand schools" (Kats, 2006, p. 8; also AFT, 2004; GAO, 2003). The consequences of poor indoor air quality on students, for example, include asthma attacks that lead to absenteeism, with more than 20 million missed school days per year due to asthma (U.S. EPA, 2010, p. 1).

Conversely, green building and green school design correlates with improved health and productivity for students and staff, including features like good indoor air quality and ventilation, temperature control, and natural light. In his review of 70 research studies, Kats (2006) determined "more daylighting fosters higher student achievement" and test scores (p. 10). In addition to school occupant health and productivity, green school facilities can save funds through water and energy efficiency cost savings and have positive returns on investment, despite some higher upfront costs of "green" designs (Kats, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, green school facilities and operations lessen the school's environmental impacts and conserve resources, increase teacher retention, create green jobs, reduce absenteeism, bring the community together, and serve as a teaching tool for interactive STEM lessons (Rainwater, 2011, pp 5-12). Moreover, school building design features and components—including schools and

classrooms—have been shown to have a measurable impact on student learning (Earthman, 2002, p. 1).

Lastly, several studies indicate that hands-on environmental education projects and civic engagement can improve test scores. In a study of 40 schools engaged in environmental education, 92% of the cases studied saw better mastery of math skills (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998). Comparing standardized measures of academic achievement in reading, writing, math, science and social studies among paired sets of students, the “Environment as an Integrating Context” students did better 72% of the time and their attendance was better 77% of the time. They also showed fewer discipline problems, increased enthusiasm for learning, and greater pride in their accomplishments (SEER, 2000).

The U.S. Department of Education used this evidence to develop its framework for exemplary green schools and established criteria for excellence in Three Pillars: reduced environmental impacts and costs; health and wellness, and environmental education, including STEM, civic engagement, and green career pathways.

Leadership and ‘Green’ Schools

Simply put, progress in the above three pillars will not happen without school leadership. The principal plays a vital role in realizing and sustaining success and change. Owings and Kaplan (2012) note that “three decades of research provides ample evidence that principals’ effective leadership positively affects school and student outcomes” (p. 30). It is the principal who serves as the “critical player in giving direction and focus to the school to bring about learning for *all* students” (Matthews & Crow, 2010, p. 5). Today’s school leaders are typically trained and evaluated based on leadership standards. The Interstate School Leaders’ Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards of leadership were adopted in 1996 and updated in 2008 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) noting that “leaders’ primary responsibility is to improve teaching and learning for all children” (CCSSO, 2008, introduction). States likewise provide leadership standards that form the basis of certification and evaluation protocols.

Leadership standards are typically broad in nature, though they often offer specific sub-criteria as well. For instance, the first two ISLLC 2008 standards call for “setting a widely shared vision for learning” and “developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (p. 6). In North Carolina, for example, three of their eight leadership standards include “Standard 1: Strategic Leadership,” “Standard 2: Instructional Leadership” and “Standard 3: Cultural Leadership” (NCSBoE, 2013, pp. 4-6). Yet, when closely examining even the sub-criteria of many leadership standards, it is difficult to find language that closely aligns to any of the three “green pillars” described above.

Principals and teachers serve as innovative change agents in seeking improvements for their schools and students that may not be specifically mandated in standards. One such innovation is in the context of green school leadership. Richard Louv (2012) has advocated for “new kinds of schools” that draw upon outdoor experiences to enhance students’ “ability to learn and think, expand their senses, and improve their physical and mental health” (p. 283). These new kinds of

schools will require new kinds of school leadership that may not yet be engrained in conventional executive standards.

Community Involvement

Undoubtedly, major school initiatives benefit from and pay greater dividends when shared by parents and the wider community. “I want all parents to be real partners in education with their children’s teachers, from cradle to career. In this partnership, students and parents should feel connected – and teachers should feel supported” (Secretary Duncan, 2010). As the nation’s top educator, Secretary Duncan is assuredly aware of the extensive body of research documenting the benefits of family and community involvement in public schools. Mapp and Kuttner (2013) assert, “Research shows that initiatives that take on a partnership orientation – in which student achievement and school improvement are seen as shared responsibility, relationships of trust and respect are established between home and school, and families and school staff see each other as equal partners – create the conditions for family engagement to flourish” (p. 5). What is evident from years of research on community involvement is involving parents and the larger community in efforts to develop and sustain a green school will certainly improve the chances of the program producing positive outcomes.

Methods

This study examined 75 educational leaders or stakeholders directly involved with a school, district or institution receiving the ED-GRS award in the years 2012-2014. The researchers chose an internet survey approach as our research goal was to reduce nonresponse and include “design features” to make the “questionnaire appear interesting and important” (Dillman, 2000, p. 81).

The U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools (ED-GRS) award

Established in 2011 by the U.S. Department of Education, with support from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and numerous other federal agencies and non-profits, the ED-GRS award is used to communicate best practices and resources to other schools and the general public (U.S. DoE, 2014). Schools and districts are nominated by state departments of education or the Bureau of Indian Education or the Department of Defense Education, but cannot apply directly to the U.S. Department of Education. Postsecondary institutions are nominated by state higher education authorities. The awards are announced annually on Earth Day by the Secretary of Education. An award ceremony for honorees is held in Washington, DC, in the summer. The recognition does not include any monetary award, nor does it cover the costs or expenses associated with traveling to Washington, DC for the award ceremony. To date, 213 schools and districts have been recognized in the years 2012, 2013, and 2014. Postsecondary institutions will begin receiving recognition in the 2014-2015 cycle. We compiled the list of contacts from the winning schools and institutions listed on the DOE’s website. Our participants served as the listed contact or principal of each respective school; in some cases, the contact was a district administrator or a school board member. The survey was thus sent to approximately 200 individuals.

Participants

We utilized purposeful sampling as participants met the “certain criteria established by the researcher[s]” (Huck, 2012, p.100) of being a receiving institution of the 2012, 2013 or 2014 ED-GRS award. Next, we sent a cover letter introducing ourselves and explaining our research questions; informing respondents that their participation was voluntary and anonymous; this cover letter was e-mailed along with the survey link. Three emails were sent out within an approximately two-week period to approximately 200 of the recipients (current contacts and/or e-mail addresses for some of the recipients could not be determined). Seventy-five of the 213 ED-GRS recipients responded thus providing a participation rate of 35%.

Researchers’ Positionality

The first two researchers serve as university professors and designed the study, collected and analyzed the survey data, and authored the resulting manuscript. The third author serves as a leader of a non-profit organization that promotes green school initiatives and also helped design the study, analyze findings and author the resulting manuscript. Our experiences and perspectives as educators and advocates for outdoor learning could have positively biased our analysis in interpreting the results as we firmly believe that educators can influence student learning and realize benefits from efforts related to the three ED-GRS pillars.

Data Sources

We collected data through an internet survey consisting of 25 questions that took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. We e-mailed each participant a cover letter with a link to a researcher-developed survey containing 19 fixed-choice responses and 6 open-ended response questions. To validate the online survey, we sought input from four informed people, including 2 principals at ED-GRS schools, 1 teacher from an ED-GRS school and an official in the Department of Education responsible for ED-GRS to offer feedback regarding the survey design and responses.

The resulting survey solicited participant’s role, years of experience, level of school, school setting, school socioeconomic demographics, school size, and year of receiving the award. The survey then asked perception questions about developing and leading the work, sustaining the work, the quality of teaching and learning as a result of green school efforts, the level of student engagement as a result of green school efforts, the amount of community engagement as a result of green school efforts, external development (fund raising) as a result of green school efforts, visibility and attention related to receiving the award, and grants and donations received as a result of the award, and other benefits of the award.

The survey also asked if the participants attended (or plan to attend) the award ceremony in Washington, D.C. Another question asked if there was a state-level green school recognition program. A further question asked if the participant would recommend that other schools or districts apply for the award.

Two open-ended questions provided participants the opportunity to share benefits and/or challenges to the school or district from winning the award, and to share additional insights. Three additional open-ended questions regarding discussing and sharing strategies related to each of the three pillars along with an optional—and separate—response portal for participants to share their e-mail address for possible follow-up dialogue were included as well. For the purposes of this paper, the responses to the fixed-choice questions and the two open-ended questions related to perceived challenges and benefits are presented in the findings; the analysis of the more in-depth questions regarding strategies will be presented in future publications. The survey instrument was structured so participants could elect to skip an item, thus not all participants answered all items on the survey.

Findings

Overall, 54 of the respondents self-identified as a principal (38), teacher (15) or assistant principal (1). Additional respondents included a sustainability or environmental director (10), head of school (4), or a buildings and grounds-related position (3). Other respondents included superintendent (1), grants coordinator (1), community liaison (1), parent (1), school board member (1) and chief operating officer (1).

In terms of experience in their current position, respondents' tenure covered the range from new to experienced: 31% had served 1-4 years, 35% had served 5-9 years, 19% had served 10-14 years, and 17% had served 15 or more years¹. Most participants identified their schools as elementary (32), followed by high schools (14), and then middle schools (11). Additional comments provided alternate configurations such as preK-8 (6), K-8 (6), District (6), or Adult/Career (2). In terms of school setting, over half of the respondents (51%) identified their setting as suburban, followed by urban (27%) and rural (22%). Thirty-eight percent of the respondents indicated they received the award in 2013, followed by 32% in 2014, and 30% in 2012.

We also asked "Please indicate the percentage of students in your school who qualify for free or reduced lunch;" nearly half (49%) indicated less than 20% of their students qualified; 11% indicated that 20-39% qualified; 22% indicated that 40-59% qualified; 10% responded that 60-79% of their students qualified and 8% indicated that over 80% received free/reduced lunch (F/RL). Thus 40% of the respondents met one of the ED-GRS criteria for nominating public schools that have more than 40% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. For all of the ED-GRS award recipients to date, about 50% of the winners have been from schools and districts with 40% or more free- and reduced-lunch qualifying students.

There was also a wide range of school sizes, with the majority being mid-size schools between 250-750 students: 15% had 0-250 students, 27% had 251-500, 27% had 501-750 students, 12% had 751- 1,000 students; 3% had 1,000 – 1,250 students, only 1% had 1,251 – 1,500 students; and 14% had over 1,500 students. Sixty percent of the respondents were from schools where fewer than 40% of students qualified for free- and reduced lunch, and of these schools 79% were suburban, 60% were elementary and 50% had fewer than 500 students. Forty percent of respondents were from schools where more than 40% of students qualified for free- and reduced

¹ Percentages in this manuscript are rounded to the nearest whole number. Thus, not all totaled percentages may equal '100.'

lunch, which were mostly urban (57%) and rural (29%), elementary (58%) and large schools - 50% had more than 500 students, with 21% having more than 1,500 students.

To better understand our first research question of the school’s experiences in regards to the award, we asked “When thinking about your green school efforts, please indicate the involvement of each group in DEVELOPING AND LEADING the work?” We then provided a Likert-scale (ranging from 1- “not involved” to 4- “extremely involved”) response set for positions and roles (see Figure 1). As Figure 1 indicates, the roles indicating the highest perceived involvement (“moderately involved” and “extremely involved” combined) were teachers, administrators, the school green team, and the facilities staff.

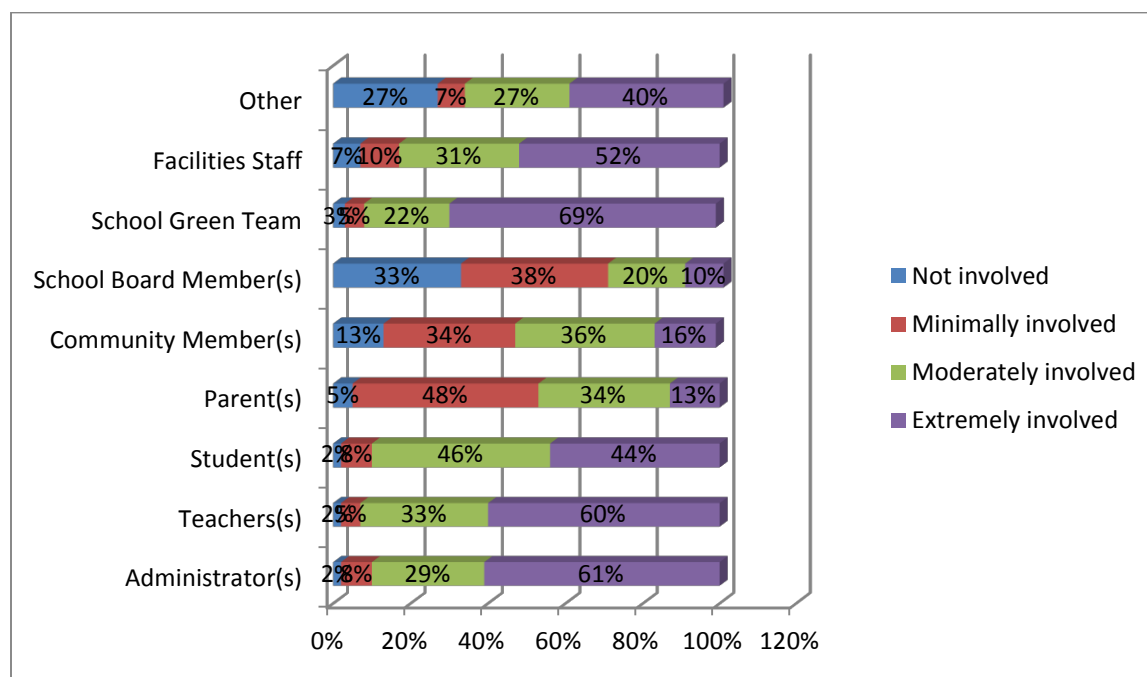


Figure 1.
Summary of perceived “developing and leading” of the work

In a similarly formatted question, we then asked “When thinking about your green school efforts, please indicate the involvement of each group in SUSTAINING the work?” In regards to sustaining this work, as Figure 2 indicates, respondents perceived that students, teachers, the school green team, and the facilities staff were most involved. There was not tremendous difference in the responses according to whether a school has a large disadvantaged student community or not, when filtering responses by the criterion of greater or lower than 40% free-and reduced lunch. Across the spectrum, administrators, teachers, students, Green Teams, and facilities staff are crucial to these efforts. Students and teachers were identified as being the most crucial to sustaining the efforts, as well as the school green team.

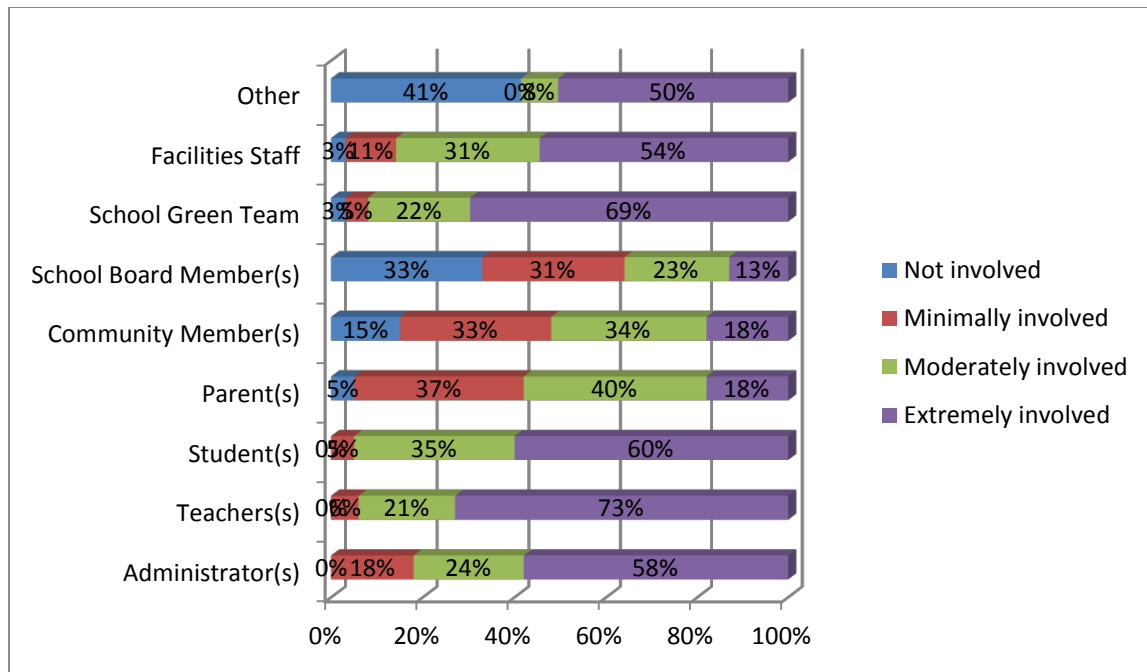


Figure 2.
Summary of perceived “sustaining” of the work

In seeking to better understand the benefits of efforts related to the ED-GRS award, we asked respondents to address the following statement, “As a result of our green school efforts, the quality of teaching and learning in our school has:” followed with a 5-item response choice set as indicated in Figure 3. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that as a result of the green school efforts, the quality of teaching and learning in their school had either “improved” or “significantly improved” (85% combined total). We also asked participants to respond to a similarly-formatted statement, “As a result of our green school efforts, the level of student engagement (student attention, curiosity, interest) in our school has:” Over 90% indicated improvement. And to better understand the school’s experience regarding community engagement, we asked participants to respond this statement, “As a result of our green school efforts, the amount of community engagement (volunteers, parental involvement, partnerships) in our school has:” As noted in Figure 3, 77% indicated improved community engagement. When we filtered responses for percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, we found some small differences: that respondents from schools with more than 40% of FRL students noted “no change” at higher levels for all three of these questions: “no change” in community engagement was noted by 33% of respondents compared to 14.7% in schools with less than 40% of FRL students. However, student engagement was noted to have “significantly increased” at higher levels (33.3% vs 28.5%), “increased” (54% vs 65%), and “no change” (12.5% vs 5.7%). Overall, the trends were quite similar across size, urban vs suburban, and elementary vs middle vs high school.

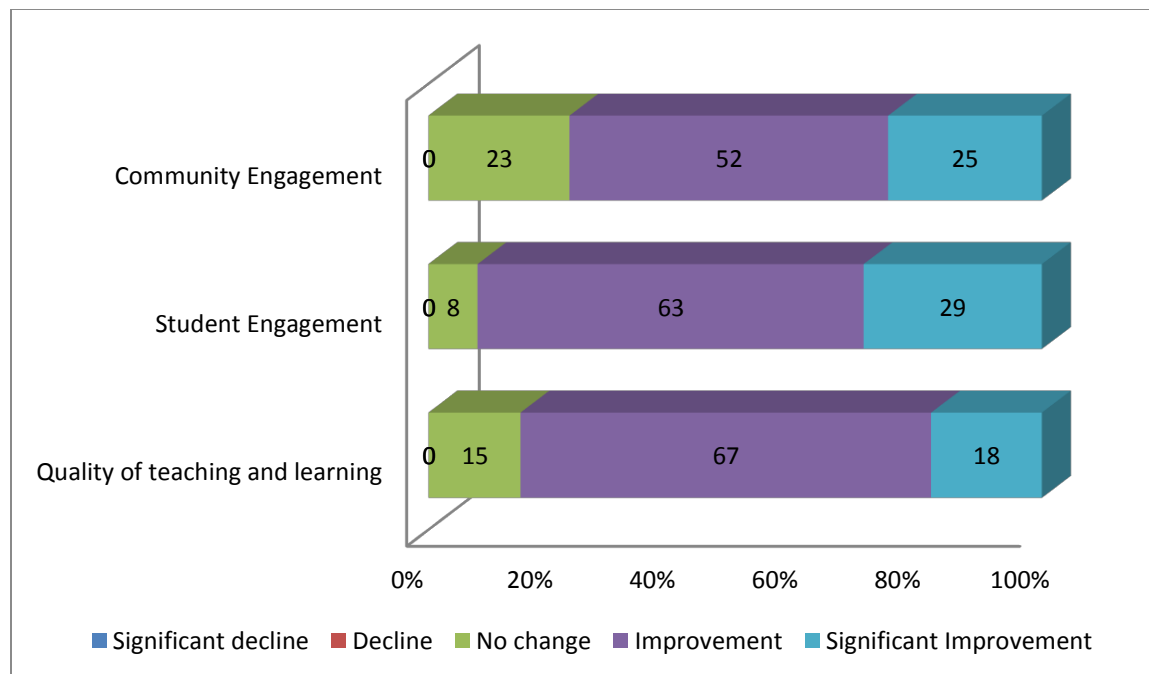


Figure 3.
Perceptions of Engagement

In regards to external development (fund raising), 48% noted an increase, 52% indicated “no change” and 0% noted a decrease in external development. We then asked the following question: “Has the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools award enhanced your stature in some way by increasing your school’s or district’s visibility and/or the attention you have gotten from any of the groups below? (check all that apply).” As noted in Figure 4, marked increases in visibility were noted in many areas. The highest increased visibility was noted as coming from local media, current parents, teachers, and school board members. There are significant increases across all the categories, including “prospective parents,” indicating that the award may help enhance a school’s stature and possibly even demand for enrollment. Recent winners (for 2014) sometimes noted that it was “too soon to tell.”

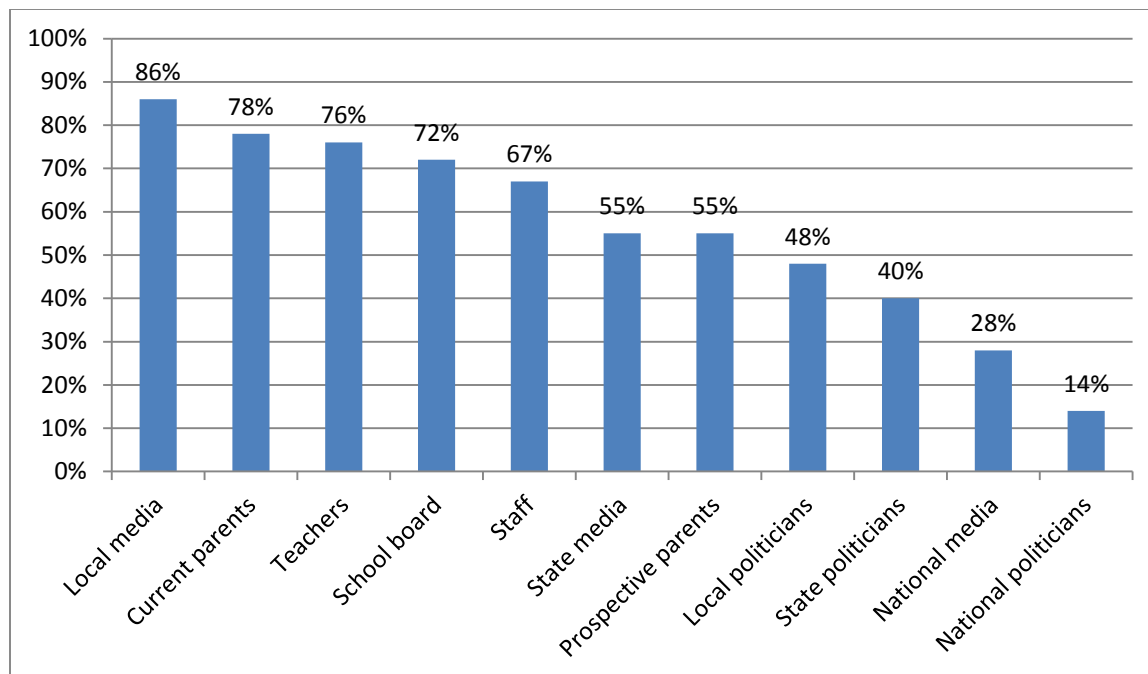


Figure 4.
Increased visibility from specific groups

We then asked respondents to answer “Have you used the award to generate any grants, sponsorship, donations or other financial support for your school or district? Only 48% of respondents answered this question, with half of those responding indicating “foundation grant” was the primary financial support generated, followed by 39% indicating generating a “local business in-kind donation” and 30% “local business donation.” Thirty-one percent indicated securing “business sponsorship” and another 31% indicated “private donations” followed by 19% who indicated securing a government grant. The response rate and answers for this question were consistent across schools with more than 40% free- and reduced lunch students and those with less.

We asked respondents to reflect about their sum benefits from the experience of applying for the award by addressing the following question, “Through the process of completing the application for the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools award, in what ways did you benefit? (check all that apply)” Their answers, as noted in Figure 5, indicate a high level of perceived benefit across the noted areas.

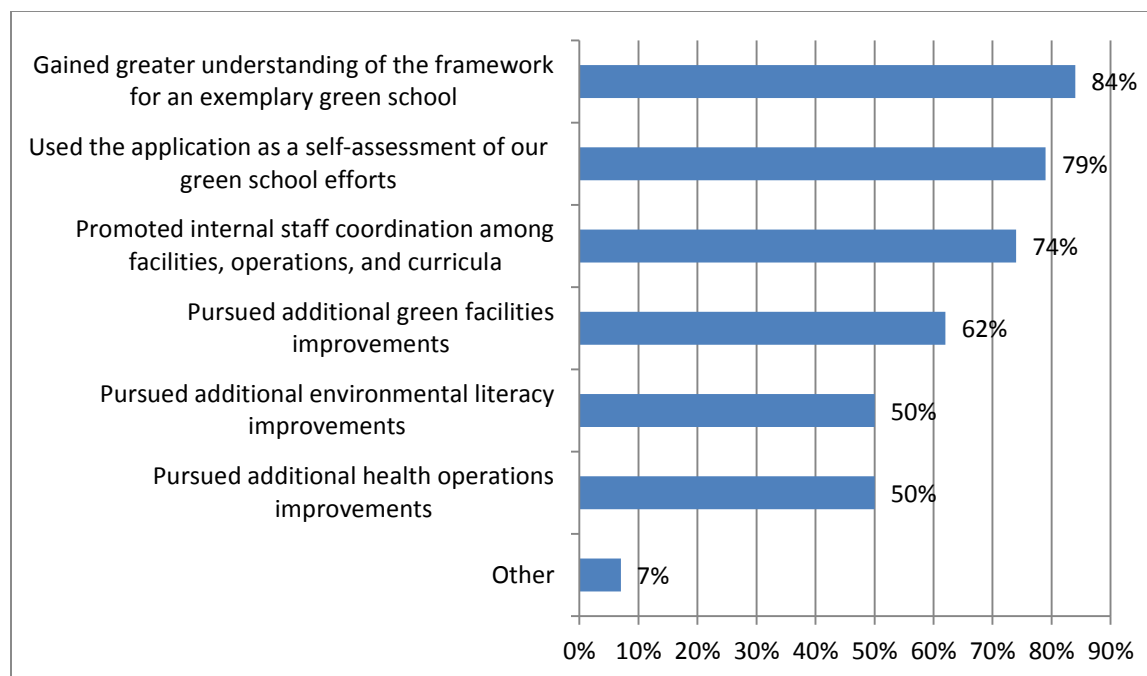


Figure 5.
Summary of perceived benefits through the ED-GRS process

An open-ended response related to benefits and challenges yielded 43 responses, many of which aligned with the fixed-choice items noted in Figure 5. For this question, researchers separately analyzed each of the 43 items and coded them in “identifying and refining important concepts” (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 304). The researchers then compared findings and agreed on these emerging themes: increased awareness of green efforts within the school community; enhanced credibility and school pride that came with the recognition; opportunities for outreach by students and staff regarding green efforts, and greater sustainability with green-related efforts. Challenges expressed were relatively minimal and included the following: funding (for physical improvements, staff, and travel to the award ceremony in Washington, DC) and difficulty of completing the application (though people respect the rigor), as well as a desire that the award would have garnered more attention.

We also asked respondents to indicate if they attended (or planned) to attend the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools award ceremony in Washington, D.C. Sixty-one percent indicated “yes” and 39% indicated “no.” Finally, we asked “Would you recommend that other schools or districts apply for the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools award?” Ninety-five percent responded “yes,” 5% responded “unsure” and no respondents indicated “no.”

Discussion

In examining the findings, we addressed the two research questions as noted above and identified the following discussion items related to a conclusion.

Benefits to the school community.

It is clear that the school community benefits from efforts to green the school. From bolstering school pride to streamlining efficiency efforts, the award itself is seen as a boost. The process itself is reflective and invites a “green team” approach that requires collaboration and coordination; this can lead to enhanced sustainability efforts elsewhere. As one respondent noted, “We decided to buy 100% renewable energy this fall, and I am certain that our facilities director felt motivated to do this in part by our Green Ribbon status.”

Others noted that this validated efforts long in the making. “The benefits so far have been recognition of the efforts we have undertaken for the past 25 years” and another noted “the award served as validation for almost 15 years of providing a rigorous academic curriculum that centers around the environment.” Yet another summed up that “our district has become a green district in part to save money in utilities and transportation, but also because we have shown it is possible, necessary, and should be our mission to leave the world a better place because we are here.”

School Leadership implications.

In this era of hyper-accountability and with the proven benefits of greening a school, greater attention is warranted on efforts to promote green efforts, specifically related to the three pillars of the ED-GRS schools. Principals play a lead role in the leading and sustaining of the green efforts, but they cannot do this work alone. As York-Barr & Duke (2004) noted after examining two decades of research on teacher leadership, “leadership must emerge from many individuals within an organization” rather than just a few formal leaders such as the principal (p. 288). Administrator preparation programs and evaluation systems should place a greater focus on green efforts, particularly in light of the potential benefits as noted in this study.

A leadership standard such as North Carolina’s “managerial leadership” could be transformed into “sustainability leadership,” for example. Updated learning standards might include aspects of green facilities, green operations, and green curricula that could transform the work of teachers and the engagement of students. As one respondent noted, “our school has an instructional framework that is based upon thinking and reasoning skills. This led us to the ‘Green’ movement years ago. We are now looking at our integration of health and wellness... ‘green’ and ‘healthy’ go hand in hand.”

Implications of U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools

Schools really appreciate the validation, awareness, and visibility that the ED-GRS award brings. The passion and excitement in so many of the open-ended responses indicates how eager people are for this kind of recognition, and that green efforts have often been invisible and championed by unsung heroes. “Before we were a green ribbon school, our community wanted to be green but did not think of themselves as green. Now that we have the recognition, we are starting to think of our school as a green school, which has bolstered new sustainability efforts at the school.” “Benefits include community pride, media attention, increased opportunity for grants.”

“The benefits have been many. We are seen as a model for green schools in our area and many people contact us for advice, or to present at conferences or workshops. In our school, it has helped us to maintain a culture of being more aware of our facilities, resource use, health of our campus and educational programs.”

The ED-GRS award application is also serving as a learning and assessment tool and raising awareness of what a green school is. The application itself is spurring people on to make improvements in their facilities, operations, and educational programs, and to promote internal collaboration and coordination among staff, teachers, parents, and students. These are the hallmarks of high performing schools and leaders. Several respondents hoped for a green schools mentoring network, which is already growing through the Green Schools National Network with affiliates in 48 states and an annual conference.

Implications for underserved and disadvantaged schools

Interestingly, our survey responses did not indicate many significant differences among schools with higher and lower portions of disadvantaged students, larger vs smaller, or urban vs suburban. There has been a public perception that green schools are pursued only in wealthier, white, suburban schools, but this perception is not supported in this survey nor in the demographics of winners to-date, since about 50% of honorees over the last three years are from disadvantaged schools (NOTE: the award criteria require that if states nominate more than one public school, the next must have 40% or more students eligible for free- and reduced lunch, thus the winners to-date may not be statistically representative of green schools nationally).

Respondents from schools with higher percentages of disadvantaged students did not experience as significant an increase in school community engagement as a result of their green efforts, yet they mentioned the use of strong partnerships with outside organizations, PTAs, and facilities staff more often, implying that receiving expertise and outside support is important to success in underserved schools. As one respondent noted, the benefits of receiving the ED-GRS award is “recognition that even school districts with a high poverty level can accomplish great things,” and it “helps with green or energy saving projects that are much less visible than a new gym.”

One unsurprising difference was that schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged students were also less likely to be able to attend the award ceremony in Washington, DC. Separately, Andrea Suarez Falken, Director of the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools, notes that the ceremony was held during the first week of June the first two years, making travel plans difficult. Now the ceremony is set for later in July. Still, according to Ms. Falken, most honorees have attended the ceremony, and only 17 out of the total 213 honorees have missed the event (~8%), and 10 of these the first year. (personal communication, 2014). So, those responding to our survey may represent more of the non-attendees. There was an expressed desire that the award and its honorees receive more attention and support, at least for travel to the ceremony.

Challenges and further study

While the overwhelming number of responses focused on the benefits of the green efforts across the three pillars of the ED-GRS award, a few responses highlighted challenges, including the costs of green facilities investments in the context of tight budgets, especially on older school buildings, and the lack of resources from the award or for travel, and lack of resources generally. Several respondents expressed a desire or hope that the U.S. Department of Green Ribbon Schools award would eventually have some prize or reward associated with it. Other challenges included how to sustain the efforts and improvements over time, especially given the competing priorities for other accountability mandates.

Work is underway to analyze more of our survey's open-ended responses and recommendations from school leaders from ED-GRS honorees and to conduct interviews and case studies with these schools to better understand the implications for school leadership and student success across the diversity of school types, sizes, and settings. In particular, we aim to better understand what kinds of support and resources are the most relevant and helpful to developing and sustain green school efforts that seek to spread best practices and provide forms of partnership, support, training, and financial resources.

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