

Customer Views

An interview with Ron Spina

Manager of Plant, Rainbow District School Board

What was the impetus/catalyst for your renewal project?

It had become apparent that our energy consumption and costs had escalated. We were spending too much of our budget on utilities. We identified an opportunity to save money by implementing a series of energy efficiency initiatives.

Rainbow District School Board was committed to creating a healthier, greener environment in which to live and learn. We realized that we could go beyond lighting into other energy sources like heating, ventilation and washroom improvements. Working with Dearness Environmental Society helped to educate the children to observe and converse their own energy use at school and at home.

What impact has this had on you, your budget, the district's schools and the board?

Personally, I came to realize how much waste we create at home, at work and in our external environment and that there is a cost to all of this waste.

I looked at our budgets and wanted to reduce costs and transfer the savings generated by energy efficiency into other priorities. We expanded our Go Green initiative, generated enthusiasm among staff, and garnered support from the Board.

We were able to keep on track with expenditures and generate savings in the long-term by anticipating the rising costs of utilities and realizing the effect of our energy conservation initiatives.

We have taken a proactive approach by reinvesting savings into preventative maintenance, which has been well received by our schools.

It goes back to the old adage that if you see vandalism, it usually promotes more vandalism, but if you clean it up, you reduce the incidences. Maintaining our facilities and establishing a sense of pride has a positive impact on employee morale. When principals and staff see that good things are happening, they are that much happier. It has improved our overall relationship with principals and created a better working and learning environment.

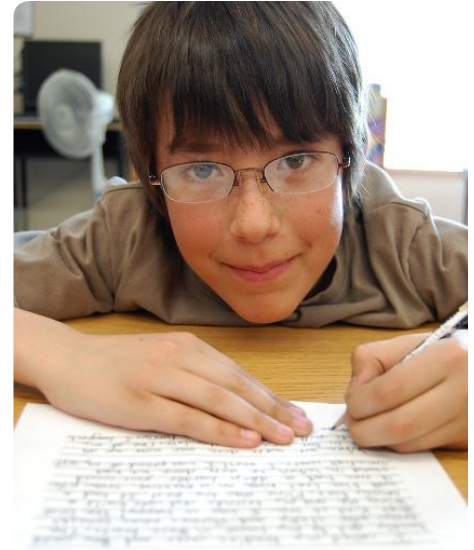
What are the major issues you face concerning facilities - past/currently/future?

One of our major issues was aging infrastructure. With limited funds, renewal was not happening as much as it should have been and we were falling behind. We highlighted buildings that required the most work through ReCAPP, an asset management tool. From there, we put a plan together to revitalize them.

We are providing better learning environments for students. In addition, building heating and ventilation have improved. This has a positive impact on student and teacher comfort and contributes to learning outcomes.

Looking forward, we are taking steps to introduce new waste reduction initiatives. For instance, although water is cheaper than some of our other utilities, we wanted to reduce water waste in an effort to support our Go Green initiative.

Additionally, we are looking to change the windows in our buildings to better retain the heat and improve ventilation. Currently, new building codes restrict the amount a window can be opened to four inches, so any window we change can only open a little. That's why we incorporate other natural methods of cooling to increase



The environmentally-friendly technologies have had a positive effect on learning.

comfort, such as the circulation of natural outside air. If we didn't put this process in place, the cost of air conditioning, both financially and environmentally, would be significant.

We have also installed ground source and in floor heating to reduce our gas consumption, T8 lighting and sensors to reduce our hydro, and displacement ventilation to reduce our heat loss and create a better in class climate for learning. As well, we are reducing the use of chemicals to clean our floors with the latest technology available.

We're marrying two objectives: creating better working and learning environments, and achieving financial and environmental effectiveness. Energy efficiency and a reduction in carbon emissions are top of mind when making decisions.

The initial stages of recycling were not as cost effective and sophisticated as they are now. Recycled paper was poor quality and some technology was cost prohibitive.

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Our philosophy is to get students to take home what they learn at school and teach their parents. A prime example is our Go Green home audit kit that students share with parents to evaluate energy consumption within their home.

We not only implement efficiencies to achieve savings and protect our planet, we also educate people to make wise choices.

Why have you chosen to work with an outside partner versus doing the renewal projects yourself? What is the value or rationale for working with Ameresco?

Staffing was an issue. The number of new projects that needed to be completed was increasing and we couldn't hire as much staff as we needed, so we looked to an outside partner. We recognized that there was value in this approach with more work being done in a shorter timeframe by experts in the field.

We issued an RFP and Ameresco was the successful candidate. We've been working with Ameresco for five years. Ameresco's Enzo Colangelo is a tremendous asset. Chantal Rozon was always there when we needed her. Ameresco's experience is phenomenal from the front of the line to engineering right through to sales. Everyone within the organization is very supportive and always available. They go the extra mile because they want to see the success of a project. Your worries are minimal. The work gets done on a regular basis. Trust also plays a big part in this relationship. Ameresco treats the project as if they were in our shoes and that is very important to us.

We know we can't do it alone, so we work in a supportive way with principals, students, teachers and staff. It truly takes a partnership to achieve great results.

What energy efficiency programs do you employ? How does this impact teaching and learning environments? Can you highlight the key results on going green with your buildings?

We have implemented energy efficient lighting, building automation systems, ground source heating systems, in floor heating, grey water systems, a wind turbine and solar panels. Our Information Services Department has installed a computer program to shut down all computers in schools during off school times. The impact has been very positive within the school community. There has been tremendous buy in from students which has further raised awareness about energy use.

We have purchased Triacta meters and video monitors in secondary schools that illustrate energy consumption to students, provide updates on our Go Green initiatives, and display conservation announcements. This spring, we are installing a wind turbine at our newest green school to help further reduce our carbon footprint. We have also installed solar panels to recharge ground source heating and generate energy. We are moving towards ensuring that Walden Public School is a carbon neutral facility.

We'll be looking to build visibility around our green initiatives to show how they all help to reduce our carbon footprint and encourage other school boards to follow in our footsteps. The Ministry of Education is interested in promoting this across the province and we welcome the opportunity to share our expertise and experience. We have also received calls from other school boards who want to know more about what we are doing. This is certainly a tribute to the leadership of our elected officials who have supported these efforts.

How have you engaged students in reducing their carbon footprint?

We engaged Dearness Environmental Society to help students understand and observe their energy consumption. We created home audit tool kits for students to take home and share with their parents. We also placed a plexiglass cover over our geothermal ground source system pipes so this new technology is on display for students, staff and the community. Above the display is a description of the geothermal process and its benefits. It is a live laboratory for all to observe and learn from.

Additionally, our Go Green initiative and Triacta meters encourage involvement at a grass roots level. There are monitors in secondary schools and some elementary schools, but the aim is to eventually provide all schools with a monitor. Current energy use is online as well as a sampling of energy use in previous years so students can see how we are using energy and how their efforts to conserve are having a positive impact.



Construction starts on the new wind turbine at Walden Public School, Lively ON

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Describe the timeline for your planned strategies and your desired results.

We are completing capital projects under the Ministry of Education's GPL funding initiative. We have also built two new schools to replace aging facilities and continue to undertake renovations using green technology as much as possible.

Another accommodation review will be completed by November. We continue to make energy efficiency a priority in all schools.

How have students/teachers/parents/board members/community reacted to your energy and your renewal strategies?

Response to Rainbow District School Board's Go Green initiative has been most enthusiastic. As leaders in learning, we are viewed as role models locally and beyond, which is something we can all be very proud of. We have garnered a significant amount of buy in from the community for the energy saving initiatives that we have implemented.

Our efforts have been recognized provincially. The Board received a Certificate of Recognition for Energy Conservation from Peter Love, Chief Energy Conservation Officer of Ontario, in November 2007.

What has been the greatest challenge in the program? Greatest reward?

Limited time and staffing is a challenge so we are certainly thankful for our consulting partners. Also, there are many different groups with funding opportunities that we could take advantage of. While we do as much as we can, we are limited in what we can apply for due to time and staffing constraints. Finding funding sources to ensure we don't miss anything and applying for them can involve tremendous effort, but we certainly try our very best.



The 'Go Green' campaign has the thumbs-up from students across the district.

What advice would you offer to others in similar positions?

It is important to engage elected officials and senior management right from the beginning. With Ameresco's help, we presented savings with renewed schools and sustainability as the major benefits. With tangible improvements, they became fully supportive. Their support continues to give us more flexibility in achieving what we need to do.

Given the opportunity, would you do anything differently?

We would also engage municipal officials from the beginning. Some of our initiatives were new to our local municipality, so the City was cautious when approving anything that had never been implemented before. We were paving new ground. Now, other school boards are following our lead.

What's next?

We have raised the bar, challenging ourselves to go further and achieve even more. It makes it interesting for us, for our staff and for our students. We want to continue to push the envelope, moving towards new initiatives and more firsts within Ontario schools. If there are any new ideas, we want to explore them.



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