

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY IN SCHOOLS: *A GREENER PATH FORWARD*

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Introduction:

Now in its sixth year of existence, the New York City Department of Education's (DOE) Office of Sustainability has made significant strides in increasing both sustainability awareness and outcomes in our schools. The impact of this initiative extends far beyond the school walls, as children take these lessons and practices into their homes and continue to carry them throughout their lives. The purpose behind having a sustainability coordinator at every school is not just to promote in-school programs and efforts, but to show the importance of this issue for our future. But they cannot just exist in name only. The position should be treated with the same level of importance that we assign to the issue of sustainability itself.

The purpose of this report is to take a brief look at where we are and where we might go in the future to expand the impact of sustainability coordinators in schools and continue the momentum that has been created thus far. The City has bold energy and sustainability goals, and our schools can and will be at the forefront of the effort to achieve those goals if we give them the tools to do so.

Background:

Sustainability coordinators are tasked with the following responsibilities:

- Developing and implementing a site-specific sustainability plan, which shall, at a minimum, include a school sustainability plan that follows the City of New York's Department of Sanitation's (DSNY) recycling rules
- Ensuring that students are following and practicing recycling rules
- Being the conduit for sustainable curriculum development initiatives
- Utilizing the United States Environmental Protection Agency Energy Star Portfolio Manager Building account to assist with energy conservation programs at their school¹

Each school is required by law² to appoint a sustainability coordinator. The details are outlined in Chancellor's Regulation A850 (2013).³ In the 2014-2015 school year, just under 90 percent of

¹ *The Power is in Your Hands: New York City Department of Education 2014-15 Annual Sustainability Report*, New York City Department of Education Office of Sustainability, 13 (Hereinafter "Sustainability Report") (This law applies to charter schools located in DOE buildings. Schools that share a campus can name the same sustainability coordinator as long as all principals agree).

² New York City Local Law 41 (2010).

³ Chancellor's Regulation A850 (2013).



the City's schools had appointed a sustainability coordinator.⁴ While this is a high number, it leaves 199 schools out of compliance with the law. Approximately 93 percent of schools with a sustainability coordinator completed the required Sustainability Plan.⁵ Again, this is a high percentage, but there is room for significant improvement, as 322 schools did not file the required plan. We must push for 100 percent compliance across the entire school system.

Sustainability coordinators help implement the programs that will help schools, and therefore the City, reach their energy and recycling goals. Through various programs, they have already taken part in programs that have:

- Recycled more than 53,000 books with only 39 schools participating in the book recycling program⁶
- Collected more than 7,600 tons of organics, with over 700 schools participating⁷
- Helped schools achieve recycling diversion rates as high as 93 percent.⁸

These numbers show what is possible when schools participate at a high level. The sustainability coordinator program can help us achieve these types of results across all schools.

How Do We Get There?

DOE's Office of Sustainability has done a good job stressing the importance of sustainability in schools and in providing training and support for sustainability coordinators. What is missing is compensation for those positions. As much as schools often pay sports coaches a stipend for their coaching duties, schools should be able to offer compensation to sustainability coordinators. This should not come from schools' existing budgets, but be a specific line-item in the City's budget. If the City is serious about achieving its significant sustainability goals, they have to treat the position seriously, not simply as an extra project for already overtaxed educators and staff.

DOE's 2015-2016 budget is more than \$27 billion.⁹ Currently, teachers who take on coaching duties receive a stipend of \$40 per hour and up.¹⁰ A similar program for sustainability coordinators would be a tiny fraction of DOE's budget while helping the City achieve its environmental goals, teaching students the value of environmental stewardship, and providing

⁴ *Sustainability Report*, 14. The actual numbers are 1,661 sustainability coordinators in 1,860 schools, or 89.3 percent.

⁵ *Id.* 1,538 schools filed the plan. This is 92.6 percent of schools with a coordinator, but only 82.6 percent, or 322, of all schools required to do so.

⁶ *Id.* at 16.

⁷ *Id.* at 17.

⁸ *Id.* at 18.

⁹ See schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/funding/overview/default.htm.

¹⁰ See uft.org/know-your-rights/session-activities-teachers.



better learning environments for all. If sustainability coordinators spent two hours per week and received \$40 per hour, the total cost to the City would be less than \$8 million,¹¹ while the benefits would be almost immeasurable.

Second, sustainability coordinators have specific tasks they must perform. They should have the time to prepare for and perform those tasks — not be asked to carve out time from their already busy schedule as a teacher or administrator. A free period on a regularly scheduled basis should be sufficient to plan and implement the programs that can have tremendous impact on school sustainability.

Finally, sustainability coordinators should have regular meetings with other coordinators (perhaps quarterly) to discuss and exchange best practices. While ongoing training is provided, a forum to see what other coordinators are doing and achieving will help bring uniformity of best practices to the City school system.

Recommendations:

There are several avenues we should explore to improve compliance and results.

- Compensation for sustainability coordinators: DOE's Office of Sustainability should look at various options on this, ranging from a stipend for the designated sustainability coordinator to full-time, paid coordinators at the school or district level. Pilot programs could determine the best path forward.
- Preparation time for sustainability coordinators: Right now, sustainability coordinators do not receive free periods or prep time to plan their efforts. According to DOE's website, this is because this was not negotiated at the district level.¹² DOE has allowed for significant training options, but has not given the sustainability coordinators specific time to perform the important and required tasks that come with the position.
- There should be a regular exchange of best practices between sustainability coordinators.

¹¹ Two hours per week at \$40 per hour x 52 weeks x 1860 schools.

¹² <http://schools.nyc.gov/community/facilities/sustainability/coordinators/faq/>.

