

CASE STUDY

Virginia Beach City Public Schools: A Role Model for Sustainability Leadership

DISTRICT PROFILE

Location | Virginia Beach, Virginia
Number of schools | 86 schools
Number of students | 67,000 students
Percentage Receiving Free & Reduced Price Meals

In 2014, Virginia Beach, Virginia was ranked as the third most conservative city in the country. Not the place you would expect to find a school district that is a national leader in sustainability. Yet, this hasn't stopped Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) from spending the past two decades building an impressive track record in implementing practices that reduce its ecological footprint and operating costs.

THE PROBLEM

Despite early success, VBCPS still had departmental, school, and division leaders who didn't view their daily practices through a sustainability lens. Getting everyone on board would require a divisionwide culture change. In 2014, Tim Cole was approached by Jennifer Seydel of Green Schools National Network (GSNN) to host the 2015 Green Schools Conference at Virginia Beach. This initial engagement led to an opportunity to work with GSNN and develop a model for whole school sustainability that could be replicated at school districts across the country.

OUR IMPACT

In July 2016, 50 VBCPS senior leaders gathered for a sustainability leadership summit where they worked with GSNN and other green school experts to identify what VBCPS needed to do to create a culture that values sustainability and supports sustainable practices at every level – from buildings and operations to classroom curriculum. GSNN staff conducted several active listening sessions before and during the summit where they helped participants begin to refocus their priorities using a sustainability lens. They also listened in on small group brainstorming sessions and served as a sounding board for ideas that were generated, helping participants narrow in on a few key areas that fit the division's sustainability vision. Over 40 ideas were generated by the end of the summit and three were selected as division priorities: building assets, transportation, and food.



RESULTS

Since 2016, VBCPS has made significant progress in the three areas identified at the summit.

Managing Building Assets

VBCPS finished construction on its thirteenth LEED building in September 2021, putting the division at just over two million square feet of LEED building space. Despite increasing their square footage by 9%, VBCPS decreased its energy consumption by close to 27%.

Lowering Transportation Emissions

VBCPS set two ambitious transportation goals: reduce fuel consumption by 50% for their vehicle fleet by 2030 and reduce transportation emissions by 50% by 2050. To meet these goals, VBCPS is shifting to newer, lower emissions vehicles and vehicles that operate on propane and electricity. They have acquired eight propane buses and eight electric buses and completed a long-range study that explores electric vehicle charging infrastructure for their entire fleet.

According to the division's 2019 Greenhouse Gas Inventory and Emissions Reduction Plan, VBCPS reduced its overall emissions by about 47,520 metric tons of CO₂ between 2006 – 2016. In addition, gas consumption in their white fleet decreased 39% and diesel consumption within their yellow fleet decreased 4%.

Adopting a Sustainable Food System

VBCPS has made a commitment to implement a divisionwide scratch-cooking program. A yearlong pilot program was conducted at Old Donation School in 2017 that included training food-service workers in scratch-cooking skills and techniques. In 2018, VBCPS hired a division chef, built a team dedicated to scratch cooking, and created a "from scratch" menu that is being scaled across the division. VBCPS also has a plan to retrofit all 86 school kitchens for scratch cooking by 2024. These efforts are in addition to VBCPS' existing farm-to-school program and their goal to increase local procurement by 30% over 2009 levels.