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## Schools' energy efforts pay off in big savings

When the money gets scarce, many school districts look to their thermostats and light switches for savings.

Lately, some districts have been calculating their annual energy savings in the tens of thousands of dollars. That's the result of installing more energy-efficient equipment to regulate consumption of electricity and natural gas, and launching districtwide consciousness-raising campaigns -- complete with save-energy posters and student "green clubs" -- aimed at getting students and teachers to turn off lights and computers. In some cases, it involves an upfront equipment expense that will pay off later, either in terms of utility bill rebates or energy savings over time.

In Osseo, district energy consultant Ron Bratlie estimated a 2009 calendar year energy savings of at least \$476,000 in comparison to 2007, the district's base comparison year. From July to September of this year, Mounds View schools realized a \$160,000 savings over the same period in 2008. In 2009, the Robbinsdale district got \$51,000 in rebates from its energy providers for conservation measures and installing more energy-

efficient equipment.

In some cases, savings result from factors beyond the control of the districts. If the prices of electricity and heating fuel dive, that saves schools money. A mild winter can result in lower heating costs, and a cool summer can cut down cooling costs.

But school officials insist their efforts to more tightly regulate energy use are paying big dividends. Plus, officials say, when word gets out how hard schools are trying to cut costs and energy use, it tends to compound the effort.

"I think it's heightened people's awareness of what we're doing," said John Ward, Mounds View schools director of human resources and operations. "You get kids policing the staff and each other on turning out the lights."

### Ramped up in recent years

Efforts to cut energy costs have been going on for years. But new technology and more aggressive marketing have allowed districts to reap larger savings in recent years.

In Mounds View, thanks to a bond request approved by voters in 1999, officials spent

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the first several years of this decade updating their mechanical systems with energy efficiency in mind. They installed occupancy sensors that automatically turn off lights in vacant rooms. They replaced energy-gulping lights in high- and constant-use areas such as gyms and cafeterias with more economical models. They replaced water-cooled compressors used for food refrigeration with more efficient air-cooled compressors. Plus, they recently partnered with a local consulting group called Schools for Energy Efficiency (SEE) to keep cutting those costs. Much of SEE's effort, which cost the district \$86,000 for the two-year program, involved marketing energy efficiency to students and teachers.

In Robbinsdale, district officials not only have been installing energy-saving roof and wall insulation and more efficient motors, but they buy natural gas for heating on the futures market. That allows them to buy gas in advance for a set price, potentially a voiding unforeseen spikes in prices. Robbinsdale and other districts also participate in programs for peak energy use periods; when energy use peaks, the utilities inform the schools and the schools turn down the juice. The schools, in turn, get price discounts.

When Bratlie was hired by Osseo, he started off by identifying energy-savings practices that might seem obvious, but weren't happening in more than a haphazard way.

"We just started identifying things we could do, such as shutting off lights, computers and televisions," Bratlie said. "It wasn't being done in an organized fashion."

Just turning off lights, school officials say, can result in tremendous savings.

"Lights are typically 40 percent of your electrical costs," said Steve Anderson, Anoka-Hennepin schools director of buildings and grounds. "We're trying to get some of that information out to our staff."

Anderson said the district is in the process of setting a benchmark for energy expenses against which costs in future years can be measured. Preliminary data show that something the district is doing seems to be working. Anderson said that a limited sample of district school energy costs for August, 2008 were \$107,000, while the August 2009 bill was \$100,000, even though the price of electricity had increased.

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