

The Great Turnoff: Somerset District Lends in Energy Conservation

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Some schools spring for expensive geothermal heating systems to reduce energy costs, or switch to solar power. The Bridgewater-Raritan Regional School District found a simpler way to save: cut the lights and turn down the heat.

In the past six months, since Somerset County's largest school district began its "You Have The Power" awareness campaign, it has cut energy consumption by 6 percent and saved \$110,000. The goal is to save about \$280,000 in a year.

"We didn't make any major changes or spend any money for equipment. So I've got to believe the majority of it is due to behavioral change - turning the lights off and keeping the thermostats set at a lower temperature," said Henry Rodrique, manager of building and grounds.

At Crim Elementary School, energy use dropped by 15 percent, saving \$11,726, from October to March, compared with the previous year. Staff and students did it by flicking lights off at lunch, shutting down computers and monitors and unplugging anything that didn't need to be connected over long weekends.

Over spring break, the plug was pulled on the faculty refrigerator, said Principal Margaret Kerr.

"It was nice to see that just doing the little things could have an impact," said George Rauh, assistant principal at Eisenhower Intermediate School, which saved \$18,515 by using 12 percent less energy.

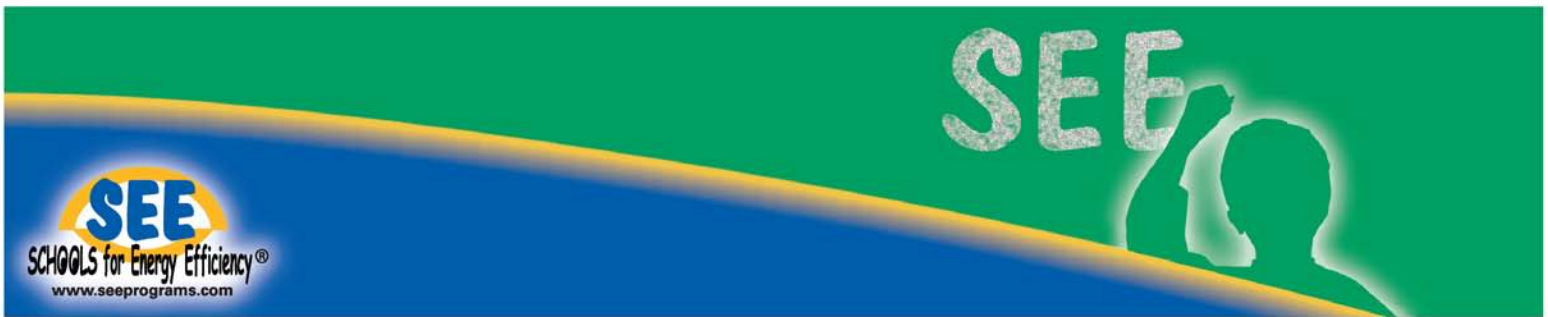
Using a computer program, the district tracks energy reduction at each of its buildings. Connie Coriell, energy efficiency coordinator, said to measure the success of the program, the district came up with a baseline year against which to compare subsequent years. The model even adjusts for extreme weather patterns.

In a 9,000-student district powered by natural gas and electricity, and with energy costs approaching \$3 million, officials decided last summer to launch the energy-savings effort.

Of the district's 11 schools, administration building, field house and maintenance quarters, all but the high school managed to see a drop in energy use, Coriell said.

The district is the first in New Jersey to use the Schools for Energy Efficiency program packaged by a Minnesota-based organization that contracts with 500 schools in 17 districts nationwide.

According to district Business Administrator Peter Starrs, Bridgewater-Raritan is paying SEE \$62,410 in the first year and \$49,204 in the second, which he said was significantly less than others considered. The effort began with training for Coriell, who met with teachers and staff, including custodians, to go



over strategies to lower energy costs. The schools get e-mail blasts and newsletters reinforcing the message.

A few years ago, soaring oil prices led some New Jersey districts to turn down the heat, eliciting complaints about cold classrooms.

Rodrique said the district sticks to state guidelines that call for the temperature to be no lower than 69, and has escaped criticism.

Coriell noted the district built its newest school, Milltown, to strict environmental standards, with a temperature control and energy management system and some solar panels.

But even that school was able to lower costs by such measures as reprogramming the temperature control system, said Rodrique.

He was puzzled why the high school, built originally as an open campus and equipped in 1995 with a computerized temperature control system, had not reduced its energy demand, but said it may be because "there are 10 separate buildings and students have to travel outside for their next class, so the building is constantly opening and closing."

Overall, the district's goal is to reduce energy use by 10 percent annually, no small savings in a district where taxpayers in Bridgewater pay \$1,018 for each \$100,000 of assessed home value and in Raritan, \$1,148.

"You can control your energy costs," Coriell said. "It's not like a textbook, that costs X amount. And you're doing what's right for the planet."

Photo Caption:

1. Last one out of his classroom, second-grader Russell Tenzer turns off a light at Crim Elementary School in Bridgewater. Below, charts tout the school's 15 percent cut in energy consumption. 2. Principal Margaret Kerr visits a class at Crim Elementary School in Bridgewater. She said the faculty refrigerator was turned off during spring break to save energy.

1. PHOTOS BY MATT RAINEY/THE STAR-LEDGER
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