

# “Schools of the Future” initiative in California



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*This article provides an overview of the “Schools of the Future” initiative introduced in California in January 2011 by the newly elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Torlakson. Its objective is to focus on the reform of the state school facility programme and to design high-performing, “greener” schools.*

## BACKGROUND TO THE INITIATIVE

The crippling economic recession in the United States has had a significant impact on California’s ability, and indeed willingness, to continue to invest in school facility infrastructure at the levels seen more than a decade ago. With this slowdown, the USD 7.3 billion funding from the 2006 state-wide bond measure is nearing depletion, prompting policy makers to reflect on investment outcomes and future public policy direction. In response, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, who assumed office on 3 January 2011, immediately launched the “Schools of the Future” (SOTF) initiative.

The SOTF initiative builds on the conclusions of a report released in 2008 by a roundtable sponsored by the California Department of Education (CED) entitled *Re-Visioning School Facility Planning and Design for the 21st Century – Creating Optimal Learning Environments*.<sup>1</sup>

“It makes no sense to teach the next generation of California’s students in facilities that are relics of the past, powered by energy sources that are out of touch with our state’s renewable future. Investing in energy efficiency will help our schools save money - now and over the long run – and show students that we’re concerned about the environment and their future.”

*Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Torlakson, 14 January 2011*

At the 2008 Roundtable, participants discussed the historical, contemporary and visionary future contexts of school facilities in California and prepared advice for the state on policy change. With the organisational assistance and facilitation of the University of California at Berkeley Center for Cities and Schools, the CED brought together architects, educators, policy makers and practitioners using a “public research” design. Over the course of the two-day event, participants explored topics ranging from emerging technologies and educational programming trends to the relationship between school design

1. California Department of Education, School Facilities Planning Division (2008), *Re-Visioning School Facility Planning and Design for the 21st Century: Creating Optimal Learning Environments*, edited by University of California Berkeley Center for Cities & Schools. [www.cde.ca.gov/ls/fa/sf/documents/roundtablereport.pdf](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/fa/sf/documents/roundtablereport.pdf)

and learning and sustainability. Nationally recognised principles of high-quality school design were used to provide a framework for critical analysis and to inspire participants drafting state policy recommendations:

- Design for the educational programme.
- Design for adaptability.
- Integrate technology.
- Promote health and sustainability.
- Enhance safety and security.
- Connect to the community.
- Support a small school culture.
- Accommodate student diversity.
- Support the teacher as a professional.

The Roundtable's findings and five primary recommendations for CDE policy change provided the foundation for the facility work being addressed in the SOFT Initiative. The Roundtable established a common framework for current and future policy work (Box 1).

### **Box 1. Vision and guiding principles for all policy work and actions in California public facilities**

#### ***Vision for California Public School Facilities***

The California Department of Education envisions school facilities that enhance the achievement of all students and are learner-centred, safe, sustainable, and centres of community.

#### ***Guiding Principles for California Public School Facilities***

The siting and design of educational facilities will:

- Reflect the local educational agency's board-adopted facilities master plan and educational specifications.
- Result from an open, community-based, and comprehensive planning process including all stakeholders and early dialogue with all involved planning agencies.
- Accommodate a complete facility supporting the delivery of the adopted educational programme, be accessible to all, and adaptable to future demographic, educational, and community needs.
- Support students, parents, teachers and staff in closing achievement gaps and preparing students for the workforce, post-secondary education and lifelong learning.
- Consider the full spectrum of community facilities and support opportunities for joint use and educational partnerships.
- Ensure safety from existing and potential hazards and incompatible land uses.
- Provide a secure environment with a focus on supervision.
- Create comfortable, attractive, and stimulating environments that support collaboration and diverse learning styles and opportunities.
- Promote sustainable practices that conserve natural resources, limit greenhouse gas emissions, optimise construction and life cycle costs, and encourage walking and bicycling.
- Incorporate superior acoustics, indoor-air quality, and natural lighting.
- Respond to current and future information, communication, and technology needs.
- Support student health, nutrition, and physical fitness.



## POLICY FOCUS OF SOTF

The SOTF initiative gathers educators, business professionals, architects, school facility practitioners, green advocates, energy professionals and policy makers to focus on two key policy areas: state school facility programme reform and the design of high performance, green schools. "We're going to create a working team that will be looking at how our schools are constructed from top to bottom and how we can prepare the next ballot measure to meet the needs of 21st century students, as well as save tens of millions of dollars that I think are now wasted in process and delay," Superintendent Torlakson indicated. "Further, we will work to build energy efficiency for every school."

Each SOTF member represents and solicits input from the constituency and industry which he or she represents. Since March 2011, SOTF sub-committees have been addressing eight separate policy areas: the first four relate to reform, and the final four are grouped around high performance schools/sustainability/green policy areas. The task of each sub-committee is to provide recommendations on eliminating legislative and regulatory obstacles to high performance/sustainable/green schools and to build on the research and work to date in these areas, including the vision and guiding principles espoused by the Roundtable.

- 1. Educational impact of design.** There is a substantial body of research on the impact of school facilities on educational achievement. This sub-committee will make recommendations on design principles and features that should be considered in a 21st century learning environment.
- 2. School site selection and community impact.** This sub-committee will review how local educational agencies and communities could collaborate more effectively in the selection of school sites. It will develop recommendations on fostering joint use, smart growth and schools as centres of community.
- 3. Modernisation.** This sub-committee will make recommendations on improving the delivery of state school modernisation programmes, with a view to transforming existing school space into 21st century learning environments. The sub-committee will consider the requirements of campus maintenance, American Disability Act modifications and educational modernisation.
- 4. Funding and governance.** This sub-committee will review current funding proposals and develop recommendations for cost savings while considering the spatial requirements for 21st century learning. It will review the current state of governance structure for delivery of school facilities bond dollars and make recommendations for streamlining.
- 5. High efficiency schools.** This sub-committee will review and make recommendations on how to promote green and sustainable school construction and operational practices.
- 6. Renewable energy.** This sub-committee will review and make recommendations on promoting the integration of renewable energy in school projects in the planning and design phases, and on ways to save operational dollars.
- 7. Grid neutral schools.** This sub-committee will review and make recommendations on how to increase the number of grid neutral schools.
- 8. Financing.** This sub-committee will review and make recommendations on how existing sources of funds can be maximised to enable local educational agencies to undertake energy efficient and energy generation projects.

The SOTF policy recommendations were presented in early June 2011 to Superintendent Tom Torlakson to assist with the development of a new platform for school facility policy and investments, including green schools, for the next four years. The recommendations will be made public in early August 2011.

## STRATEGIC POLICY GUIDANCE

In a separate but related project, the Superintendent assembled a Transition Advisory Team, a bipartisan group of educators, labour and business leaders who are providing strategic advice in the areas of school finance reform and funding; curriculum and assessment; accountability and data; educator preparation and evaluation; early childhood learning; education supports for the whole child; secondary transformation (including linked learning, career technical education and college entrance requirements); and flexibility and efficiency initiatives, including school facilities/construction reform and modernisation.

Green schools can use on average 33% less energy than conventionally designed schools. For many schools this means energy cost savings of approximately USD 100 000 a year – more than enough to fund another teacher. There are over 10 000 schools in California with the vast majority built over 30 years ago. Making these schools energy efficient while improving the educational environment is an opportunity that the state cannot ignore and enacting state policies that target green upgrades in existing schools is key in advancing many state policies in the educational, environmental and energy arenas.

Through the work of the Transition Advisory Team and SOTF, and existing research, a new policy imperative is emerging in California. The cumulative effect of these efforts will assist state legislators and local school board members to determine policy priorities.

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