

New federal program will recognize green schools

SI&A Cabinet Report

By Marc Maloney

The nation's most environmentally-friendly schools will be feted this Earth Day as recipients of the inaugural Green Ribbon Awards.

The awards program, announced last September by the U.S. Department of Education, will honor schools that save energy, reduce costs, feature environmentally-sustainable learning spaces, protect health and foster wellness, and offer environmental education to boost academic achievement and community participation.

To participate in the program, schools must be nominated by their state's chief education officer. Potential applicants will be reviewed by California Department of Education staff, and CDE will forward up to four California nominees to the U.S. Department of Education for consideration by March 22. Winners will be announced Earth Day, April 22.

Applications will be evaluated based on each school's progress toward reaching the goals of the three Green Ribbon Schools Pillars: environmental impact and energy efficiency, healthy school environments, and environmental and sustainability education.

Kathleen Seabourne, administrator of school facilities for CDE, said the opportunity to participate in the program is meant to inspire California schools to look to the future and to make positive changes.

"More than anything else, it's meant to encourage movement toward those objectives," she explained. "We understand that we're not going to see everybody meeting all those objectives right away, but we still want everyone to take a look, and we're urging them all to apply."

To assist schools with the application process, Seabourne said, CDE plans to host a series of webinars designed to address applicants' frequent questions.

Despite a recent emphasis on environmentally-friendly construction practices apparent in the design and construction of many new schools, Seabourne does not think newer schools necessarily will have an advantage when applications are scored.

"A brand-new school may not yet have its curriculum and health pillar fully developed," she noted. "Whereas older schools may have an established staff that has a lot of really cool things going on curriculum-wise."

In a statement, State Superintendent of Public Education Tom Torlakson said he was excited California would join in the program.

"California is proud to participate in this new federal program to recognize schools with environmentally-sustainable learning spaces that have boosted student performance," he said. "Not only do green schools save districts money and energy and protect the health of students and staff, but studies also show these learning spaces actually improve academic achievement. This works hand-in-hand with my Schools of the Future initiative to streamline school building regulations in an effort to create jobs, green schools, and give students the opportunity to learn in modern facilities instead of relics of the past."