

Board builds on green reputation

Upper Grand District School Board reveals new environmental classroom project

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In the near future, students may be sitting in straw bale classrooms, using composting toilets and breathing fresh air from indoor living walls.

It's all part of the plan for the Upper Grand District School Board, which received a unique building project report at its meeting last night.

"I'm excited about this project," trustee Mark Bailey said. "This shows our board to be a provincial leader in this area -- the environment. We're light years ahead of other boards."

Four schools, including Westwood Public School in Guelph, will be home to new environmental learning centres.

Each of the four centres will be separate from the main school building, with a south-facing exposure to take advantage of the sun. Three of them will house two classrooms, a common room and washrooms, and each will have its own unique environmental focus. Rockwood Centennial Public School will demonstrate a reduced carbon footprint, and could be constructed using a straw bale system that would allow it to be dismantled and moved. This centre may have one classroom.

J.D. Hogarth Public School in Fergus will explore "off the grid" concepts: partial electrical storage coupled with the careful measurement of power.

Minto Clifford Public School will focus on natural processes with its living wall of plant matter and composting toilet.

Westwood may be an all-electric building with thermal storage, designed to encourage energy conservation.

Paul Scinocca, the board's manager of capital projects, said a straw bale construction classroom is already underway at Island Lake Public School in Orangeville and is expected to open in September 2009.

"Right now, it's not possible to build an entire school like this," he said. "But hopefully the students may use some of these concepts in their own homes in the future."

The centres will be used on a daily basis as regular classrooms.

As much as possible, Scinocca would like the environmentally friendly features to be visible to students so they can be incorporated into the curriculum.

Funding for the projects, expected to cost \$686,000 each, is coming from the Ministry of Education.

Scinocca expects to come back to the board with concept designs after Christmas, and hopes to start construction in the spring.