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Grant Elementary goes green

Solar panels and recycled furniture create an eco-friendly classroom.

By **JANESE HEAVIN** of the Tribune's staff
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Don Shrubshell photo

Grant Elementary School second-grade teacher Jenifer Hartz works with her class in their new eco-friendly schoolhouse. Peckham & Wright Architects volunteered to build the state-of-the-art "green building" for their 30th anniversary.

Fiona Allen and Aaliyah Williams are pretty darned proud of their second-grade classroom at Grant Elementary.

The walls are painted to match the sky, nature, water and sun; the floors are made of a corn-based product; sun beams through two skylights; and there's a little slot in one of the cabinets that lets them slip paper into a recycling bin.

"Everyone wants to be in the new classroom," Fiona said.

Who wouldn't? The new eco-friendly classroom looks like an old-fashioned one-room schoolhouse but has modern technology to make it friendly not only for kiddos but also for Mother Earth.

Grant Elementary's new classroom is the brainchild of Nick Peckham of

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Peckham & Wright Architects. The company is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year and wanted to do something to give back to the community. When Peckham and his crew last year learned that a Grant Elementary mobile home was destroyed in an arson fire, they volunteered to replace it with a state-of-the-art "green" building. Over the summer, hundreds of volunteers worked on the building using mostly donated supplies from roughly 100 local businesses.

Jenifer Hartz's class moved into the schoolhouse this year even though there is still some work to be done. Solar panels should be going in within the coming weeks, as are acoustic boards that should reduce some of the echoing going on now. Furniture made of recycled materials is also expected to arrive soon. And over the coming year, students plan to take advantage of an adjoining garden space outside the building.

Even in its unfinished state, Hartz is just as impressed as her students.

"It's beautiful," she said. "I love the spaciousness of it with the vaulted ceilings. It's colorful. It's just such an opportunity for children to learn about the environment and sustainability."

Hartz can take some of the credit for the beautiful building: She helped design it. She spent hours over the summer working with Peckham to pick out the wall colors and floor pattern and to let him know what design features would work best for a learning environment.

But the environmentally friendly building isn't just benefiting Hartz and her students. The little schoolhouse has literally transformed Grant Elementary. Ever since Peckham pitched the idea, Grant has been "going green." This year, students have formed an environmental club and the school staff is more conscious of the resources they're using, Principal Beverly Borduin said. Styrofoam lunch trays, for instance, have been replaced by cornstarch trays, and Borduin has replaced paper newsletters with electronic updates sent to parents who request online versions.

Although the effort is concentrated at Grant now, it just might prove to be contagious. Borduin said already she has had requests from teachers in other buildings to tour the new schoolroom, and community members have stopped by in the evenings to check it out, too.

Peckham is modest about the project, which has been made possible with nearly \$300,000 in donated time and supplies.

But he's thrilled, too, to see kids and community members so interested in the school.

"I had no idea the impact it would have," Peckham said. "It's gone further than I thought it would, frankly."

One outcome he'd like to see is more construction use the types of eco-friendly features included in the new schoolhouse.

"One of the goals is to normalize this kind of building," Peckham said. "Absent an example in the ground, people might think a green building is weird or looks strange or is for hippies or something. We're using what is clearly a historical architectural approach, at least in the exterior and



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shape of the building, but at the same time with the thought of the greenness of the building."

A film company is creating a documentary about the eco-friendly school, expected to be released in December. The film will capture the project from its conceptual state to its impact on Grant Elementary.

Grant kids don't have to wait to see the movie: They're feeling the impact of the eco-schoolhouse already.

"They're excited about being in the 'cool' new classroom," Hartz said. "And they're excited about learning about the environmental features that make the classroom special."

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