

Leadership at Learning Gate

PLATINUM



Patti Girard, Principal

This is written from the perspective of Patti Girard, school principal, before the construction of the LEED classroom buildings began.

Patti Girard stands on the porch of the administration building for the small charter school. For nearly 20 years she has worked hard to bring environmental education to children in west central Florida and this 10-building campus is a major step toward that mission. Every day, 600 children attend classes taught by passionate instructors in traditional Florida cracker style buildings. It has taken a lot of hard work and dedication, but the students, parents, and staff are all fully vested in the school's mission: to prepare students to successfully participate in their family, school and community, through an educational program that promotes academic excellence, community service and environmental responsibility. Drawing in a deep breath and holding it for an extra moment, Girard allows herself a rare moment of satisfaction. She had done well for the students here.

Moving to the porch's rocking chair, a symbol of respect to the school's location in a quiet shaded, semi-rural Florida environment, Girard begins musing on the factors leading to her decision to expand the school's capacity. Foremost on the list is the number of students waiting to get into the school; perennially more are on the waiting list than are enrolled even though state funding for

"The initial coming together of a project team can be tricky. With the Learning Gate Team, it was unique. We felt empowered in the project because we were attempting to do something that was never been done before. Everyone was dedicated to achieving the LEED points needed and working together and doing the project in the correct manner. What made it work was that everybody involved knew the end goal before the project started."

*-Drew Smith,
Project LEED Consultant*

the charter school is only 80% of what is offered to traditional public schools. Thus, fundraising efforts must go beyond efforts employed by traditional schools. Additionally, parents are required to spend at least 30 hours of volunteer time and 10 hours of educational time with the school every year to further promote learning and involvement. As a dedicated educator, it is difficult to tell parents they may never reach the top of the long waiting list and Girard hopes adding buildings would help her further fill the need in her community.

Adding buildings would also allow for restructuring the delivered curriculum to a project-based-learning model, a vision Girard has always had for the school. With more space, teachers could employ active learning techniques, use classroom computers more effectively, and provide outdoor and indoor spaces for children to truly explore and learn.

Her first step was to build a strong team of visionary members who will support her efforts to bring an environment of excellence to the school for use by the teachers and students. This team, including parents, staff, contractors, and consultants, will need to be enthusiastic and dedicated, not succumbing to the frustrations of a long difficult project even when roadblocks threaten progress. She reflected on some of the difficulties she had faced in bringing her school to fruition.

Learning Gate was established in 1983 by Patti Girard as a "pre-school where kids get dirty". The original location of the pre-school was on a 5-acre piece of property on the outskirts of Tampa. The current school grounds are full of beautiful oaks and native vegetation. Also on the Learning Gate property is a small working farm with a barn, chicken coop, garden, and farm animals. Girard's original vision remains unchanged—to develop an all-encompassing curriculum that integrates the environment into every subject matter.

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Rather than avoiding the issues brought before her, she sought counsel from stakeholders and aggressively crafted solutions that satisfied everyone involved. By inviting all voices to be heard, Girard had created an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration where one of discord could have flourished.

But there are more concerns than Girard had hoped. With residential neighbors already complaining about the light pollution at night and the heavy traffic before and after school, to say nothing of during special events, she knows these are issues she would have to address if she wants to keep peace among the trees, wetlands and ponds. She truly believes in the ideals of a community school and does not want to further alienate the neighbors.

Next on the list of concerns is her vision for LEED certification for the new buildings, to validate the school's focus on excellence and the environment. She knows she will need community buy in, not just from those within the school but from the surrounding community, as well. Many people had suggested that Learning Gate should strive for LEED Gold certification; Girard, however, asks how teachers can expect students to create first-rate products in the classroom if the school's leaders aimed for second best? Although she has been warned that the cost and process for building LEED Platinum classroom buildings would be higher, she hopes the increased costs would be far outweighed by the benefits of teachable buildings, standard setting, and lower utility and operating costs. The problem, of course, is selling the vision to everyone concerned: parents who will have to help fund-raise, students who will have to wait for the process to be completed, contractors who will have to be educated on LEED standards, teachers who will be asked to develop new methods to use the buildings in their instruction, and local and state building officials who may not have much experience with innovative, green building.

As children began arriving for the fast approaching school day, Girard shakes herself out of her reverie. The moment of satisfaction is over: there's no time to dwell, as her mother used to say. There are plans to make, problems to address, and people to consult. It is time to once again move forward.

Student
Interview
about
Patti
Girard

(click to view)

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