

Nebraska Energy Office
Focus Group Summary Report
For The
Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program

Purpose

The primary aim of this qualitative research study was to obtain marketing information which could be used in developing future marketing strategies and promotional information to increase awareness and utilization of the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program. More specifically, the following informational objectives were addressed in the research project.

Informational Objectives

- 1) Why do schools apply or not apply for Technical Analysis grants?
- 2) Why do schools, after receiving a Technical Analysis, not apply for a building improvement loan? Is there a recurring reason for non-participation in the building improvement loan program?
- 3) Do focus group participants believe that everything has already been done in their school building to lessen energy use?
- 4) For those who have participated in the building improvement loan program, how can the program be improved? What do they dislike about it?
- 5) Generally, how do school board members react to the findings of the Technical Analysis report? Are they aware of a no-interest loan program which could finance the building improvements?

Methodology

Given the desire to "listen to" both program participants and non-participants from a geographic statewide standpoint, four focus group sessions were conducted with each session including both program participants and non-participants. By "mixing up" the group with both participants who were aware of the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program and potential participants who may or may not be aware of the program, it was possible for the moderator to facilitate greater discussion and interaction between respondents since heterogeneous groups have a broader range of experiences and awareness levels to share. After completing the first focus group session in Lincoln, Nebraska, it was evident that utilizing a combination of participants and non-participants did facilitate greater interaction and discussion.

Focus group participants were recruited at random from master lists provided by the Energy Office using a screening and recruiting guide developed by Wiese Research Associates, Inc. These lists included past program participants as well as future program prospects (viz., non-participants). WRA utilized its own staff of interviewers to recruit focus group participants by telephone. Potential participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a research group discussion about various programs and services being offered by the Nebraska Energy Office. Each respondent was offered a \$40.00 cash honorarium in appreciation for their cooperation as a participant. WRA also sent a follow-up reminder letter to those who agreed to participate and confirmation telephone calls were also made a day or two before each focus group was conducted.

A total of fourteen (14) people were initially recruited for each of the four focus group sessions. The actual number of respondents attending each focus group ranged from a minimum of eleven (11) participants in Lincoln to a maximum of fifteen (15) participants in Kearney. In both Norfolk and Scotts-bluff thirteen (13) of the fourteen (14) participants initially recruited were able to attend. The total qualitative study entailed "listening to" fifty-two (52) respondents.

Within each focus group session approximately half of the respondents were past participants in the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program and approximately half were non-participants. Respondents included administrators/superintendents, maintenance/engineering staff, and local school board representatives. Within each of the four focus group sessions approximately one-third of the total group represented administrators/superintendents, one-third represented maintenance/engineers, and the remaining one-third school board members. No more than two individuals from any one school district were invited to each focus group session and no more than two districts per geographic area could have more than one representative at each focus group session. In this way, we were able to establish a total sample that was not only geographically representative of the state of Nebraska, but also represented program participants versus non-participants, across various levels of potential decision-makers in the application process (viz., administrators/superintendents, maintenance staff/engineers, and school board members).

Instrumentation (Discussion Guide)

After a detailed needs assessment with the client, Wiese Research Associates, Inc. developed a discussion guide or outline which addressed all areas of interest for gathering information to meet the research objectives of the project. Given the informal and unstructured format that focus groups provide, it was also possible to "add to" and "delete" certain questions during each respective focus group session depending upon the interactions of the group.

Midway through each focus group session, the moderator also "took a break" and asked Nebraska Energy Office observers if there were any additional question areas they would like to explore or discuss during the second half of each focus group session.

WRA provided an experienced moderator to conduct each focus group session. The same individual conducted all four focus groups and the same basic discussion guide was utilized in all four geographic areas. While a few additional or unique questions were identified after each subsequent group, the major thrust of each focus group session entailed "focusing upon" the initial research objectives outlined in the Discussion Guide in Appendix A of this report.

Facilities

The first focus group session in Lincoln, Nebraska was conducted with two-way mirror viewing facilities. Representatives of the Nebraska Energy Office observed the focus group session through the viewing mirror and utilized the first focus group as a "pilot test" of the discussion guide format as well as the feasibility of utilizing both past participants and non-participants in the same focus group session. Based upon the results of the initial focus group in

Lincoln, Nebraska, the decision was made to continue utilizing heterogeneous groups in terms of past program participation for the future focus groups in Norfolk, Kearney, and Scottsbluff.

The final three focus group sessions were conducted in local hotel meeting room facilities. While no two-way mirror viewing room facilities were available in these other geographic areas, observers from the Nebraska Energy Office were able to monitor the focus group discussions via an audio room-to-room speaker system. Operationally, the focus group session with the participants and moderator was conducted in one meeting room and an adjacent meeting room facility was utilized for representatives of the Nebraska Energy Office to "listen in" to the overall discussions. The WRA moderator explained to program participants at the beginning of each focus group session that the discussions were not only being tape recorded for later transcription and analysis purposes, but also that representatives of the Nebraska Energy Office were currently "listening to" the discussion in an adjoining room. The main reason for separating the observers from the focus group participants was to ensure that the respondents "focused in" on the topics on the discussion guide and did not deviate or get sidetracked by other questions to Nebraska Energy Office representatives. Review of the verbatim transcripts in Appendix B of this report will indicate that the subsequent discussions were not only "very candid", but also that the tape recording and audio monitoring did not apparently cause any obstructive interference with the interaction of the groups.

Results

A series of structured questions were predetermined and used as a discussion guide by the moderator. The focus group session was tape recorded and transcribed for later content analysis. Appendix A of this report presents the Discussion Guide. Appendix B presents the four verbatim transcripts of the approximately one and one-half hour focus group session in each respective market area.

Program Awareness

The first portion of each focus group session dealt with investigating respondents' unaided as well as aided awareness of the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program. Initially, the moderator asked respondents, "What can you tell me about the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program? What comes to mind first?"

A number of themes were identified as the key "triggers" for setting consumers' expectations about the School Loan Program. The primary theme or response pattern in terms of unaided awareness dealt with the loan or payback factor. It was very evident from respondents in all four geographic areas of the state that the term "loan" sends a signal to potential decision-makers and may be a barrier in the application process. The following verbatim comments summarize respondents' "top of mind" reaction to the term Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program:

- Lincoln: "The loan program is not nearly as attractive as the grant program."
- Norfolk: "I would think one of the big things would be the interest. The cost of the loan."

- Lincoln: "School board members do not want to tie in other school boards down the road to something that they have to pay on that was decided by a former board."
- Scottsbluff: "I think of the payback, when I hear the word loan."

A secondary theme or observation was the fact that respondents not only preferred grants, but they also had a great deal of confusion about what now qualified for grant money versus what qualified only for loan money. The following verbatim replies summarize participants' preferences for grants and also some of the confusion which is now occurring with the new loan program.

- Kearney: "It was sure a lot nicer when they gave you the money, when you didn't have to pay it back."
- Lincoln: "The loan money is not nearly as attractive as the grant program."
- Kearney: "Is this the only program they have that loans money. I don't know the name of this program, but we have just applied for it. Is this to include grant money as opposed to loan money?"

In addition to the above comments, there were also indications later in the discussion that respondents were operating off of information they had gathered five and six years ago under federal programs. They were not aware of many of the recent changes in the new state program. Later in this report we will discuss consumers' experiences with energy analysis and Technical Assistance grants. The reader of this report will then see that many people were relying upon information that was true five and six years ago. They often had not conducted recent audits within the last two to three years or applied for some of the new loan monies under the new program. One of the problems in promoting

the loan program is that people are assuming that the application processes that were true under the older grant programs still are true under the newer and revised state program. Dealing with this past confusion of four or five years ago is definitely an obstacle for informing people about your more recent programs.

A third theme or response pattern identified during the initial program awareness portion of the focus group sessions dealt with specific sources of awareness for gaining knowledge about the new program. It was evident from the following comments that respondents had utilized multiple sources of awareness, but that the primary information vehicles recalled were various types of information mailed from the Energy Office as well as local newspaper releases in their area which indicated other schools in their area had qualified for funds. The following verbatim replies indicate that respondents had utilized multiple sources of information to gain awareness about the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program.

- Lincoln: "We get mailings out that talk about loan programs, we really probably don't look at that nearly as close as we do the grant programs."
- Lincoln: "I attended a workshop put on by the State Energy Office that explained the loan program."
- Kearney: "Mailings from the Department of Energy."
- Kearney: "After the fact, the action that has been taken by another school has been publicized here in the newspaper. Haven't really seen much on the loan program where I work. I usually see that other schools have applied for it and received it in the paper."
- Scottsbluff: "I guess the last information that I've been receiving has been geared strictly to the loan program. Is the Department sending out anything relative to grants themselves?"

The final area explored during the initial program awareness portion of the discussion dealt with the potential barriers respondents had experienced when they had attempted to applied for loans. More specifically, the moderator asked, "Why haven't you applied for loans or grants under the program in the past? What problems, if any, have you heard about or experienced?"

One of the key barriers frequently mentioned by respondents was the amount of paperwork that was required to apply for the loan program. It should be noted that many of these comments were based upon incorrect awareness of the actual program itself, but these "perceptions" reflect perceived barriers which need to be dealt with from a marketing standpoint - whether they are in fact true or not. The following verbatim replies indicate participants' desire to simplify the application process and cut down on the paperwork.

- Norfolk: "This is one of the reasons we rejected the idea of the loan program, was because of the paperwork, another analysis, it's all there in black and white, it was done quite comprehensively, so it was redundant."
- Kearney: "I think there's been a great deal of confusion about those studies, when you can use them, what they have to include, how long they were good, to me there is a lot of confusion about those. Now we've had technical assistance studies done on each of our buildings. Whether those are valid now, they have not been during the past two years, whether they're valid or not now, I have no idea."
- Kearney: "Do the grants or loans change, do their objectives change because of if they don't change with their objectives, why should the analysis not be valid?"
- Norfolk: "Paperwork, paperwork and time. The time it took to get the paperwork completed, I mean signed and back, redone, signed and back, takes a long time to get that."

- Norfolk: "Well, the paperwork, the idea of the analysis and the follow-up analysis and so on. It's valuable, but my point was, why can't it be simplified?"
- Norfolk: "Why all the hurdles, why all the hurdles in this program? Why all the catch-22 things? Can't this be simplified like some other government programs have?"

In summary, participants felt they were aware of the program available through the Nebraska Energy Office, but when the moderator probed respondents to state more specifically their understanding of these programs, it was evident there is still a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about the differences between previous grant programs and the new school loan program. Stated awareness levels for the program were as high in Norfolk, Kearney, and Scottsbluff as in the metropolitan Lincoln area. In the Scottsbluff area a number of respondents had not only participated in the program, but also appeared to indicate that they felt their needs had been met. In some of the larger Scottsbluff school districts they would simply, "rather do it themselves". Respondents were appreciative of the assistance they had received in the past from the Nebraska Energy Office, but they often felt that the need to continue working on energy efficiency was not as great as other needs in their school. Frequently, respondents indicated that their potential savings from working on more energy efficiency did not now justify the time, administrative hassles, and overall return on investment for the time and expenses incurred.

General Awareness Of Current Energy Usage

The second portion of each focus group session dealt with the respondent's perceived need for and perceived awareness of having done an energy analysis or audit of their current school buildings. One of the key issues during this session of the focus group discussion was to identify whether or not respondents felt they had already done everything they could to improve energy efficiency in their schools and, if not, how willing they would be to make additional improvements if an updated analysis was conducted. Review of the self-report data indicated that over half of the respondents across all four focus group sessions were definitely aware that they had done an energy analysis or audit within their school district in the past. The remaining half of the focus group participants were simply not sure or even aware of whether or not an energy analysis had ever been done in their school district before. When the moderator asked respondents how many were "definitely sure" they had conducted an analysis within the past three years, only about one-third of the total participants could answer in the affirmative.

It was evident that while many school districts have done energy management analysis in the past, the vast majority of these audits have not been updated or conducted within the past three years. This indicates that many school districts may simply not "see the need" for updating their energy management analysis and may feel that they are already doing a great deal to conserve energy. As one participant stated, "We have already completed most of the major improvements and are grateful for the help of the Nebraska Energy Office, but any improvements we do from now on will probably have a more limited return on investment."

One key theme that emerged during the discussion of awareness of current energy usage dealt with perceived conflicts of interest on the part of private consulting firms who had conducted energy management analysis in the past. It was evident that among participants who had conducted energy management analysis, there were a sizeable number of respondents who were cynical about the audit process that had been required by the federal government five and six years ago. The following verbatim comments summarize the perceptions of consumers today based upon some of the experiences they had five years ago with federal programs.

- Lincoln: "I don't know if you are going to get any of this script or not, but I have a bit of concern about the relationship and the interaction with the outside agencies, like the architects and the engineers and that type of thing and I don't know if I would like to say that it might be easier if we didn't have to have that step or not."
- Lincoln: "Well, you know I wonder if maybe a lot of us, especially we are all talking, most of these smaller schools, Class B, C, you know, your A schools probably all have engineers but your smaller schools, they can't afford engineers, let's face it. In order to get an energy grant, you almost have to go through an engineering firm because you need a Philadelphia lawyer to fill the doggone thing out. That to me, I think, is a big problem."
- Kearney: "I kind of think, I don't know, our situation was kind of do what we wanted to do but you had to have, to look at it, they kind of come geared to what you want, they kind of come and study what you wanted studied, I mean, they don't take the whole picture, I mean, we've had it before so, but your engineer is basically going to look at what you're going to tell him to look at anyway."
- School Board Member: "I don't know, I mean, that's what we can get reported to us at the school board, you know. When he was there, maybe he did look at a lot more stuff. So I don't know if it's just a case of you're kind of snowed under with a lot of stuff and they kind of just hurry up and get it out."

- Lincoln: "I mean a four or five grand fee just to come out and take a look at the ground and the City Engineer could go over and look at the same thing as part of his daily work and tell you you could put something there or not."

- Maintenance Enginner: "They have their interests. They're getting a commission on it. They need to make their car payment, they need, you know, they want their group to grow, you know, and it's just ridiculous, some of them, the figures they come up with."

- Kearney: "They weren't there more than three hours. They went back and wrote a 45 page book to me about everything and then charged us \$3,000."

- Scottsbluff: "The last engineering firm we had, whatever we paid them, it wasn't worth it, because the energy savings ideas that they come up with a sixth grade kid could have come up with the same thing."

The above scope of verbatim comments from various geographic areas as well as different types of focus group participants indicates the extent to which the criticism of existing private consulting firms was evident from within the total group. When the moderator explained the fact that the new program required that the firm conducting the technical analysis could not be involved in the actual improvement program, participants often indicated they were not aware of that fact and felt that it was a desirable thing to do. In fact, one respondent in the Lincoln group ask, "Would it be out of line to recommend that the State Energy Office employ their own engineer to be used by the schools that need it so that we've not got the private conflict?" Here again, there is evidence that even respondents in the immediate Lincoln area are not aware of the fact that a registered engineer is on staff at the Nebraska Energy Office. Most of the perceptions dealing with a "conflict of interest" about the firms doing the technical analysis were based on experiences that occurred five and six years ago

with the federal programs. While these concerns are no longer real or necessarily true, the fact that consumers perceive this conflict of interest may also make it more difficult to market your Technical Analysis grant program.

A second theme that emerged during the discussion of current energy usage dealt with uncertainties or misunderstanding about the current Technical Analysis grant program which offers up to \$2,500 per building from the State Energy Office to pay for an energy audit. While approximately one-third of the overall focus group participants were aware that there was a grant program to conduct an energy analysis audit, the fact that two-thirds of the participants did not realize that this was a grant program and that \$2,500 was available indicates the need to promote this program in the future. Some of the following verbatim replies indicate the various levels of awareness and misunderstanding about the existing grant programs to do technical analysis.

- Kearney: "I think there has been a great deal of confusion about those studies, when you can use them, what they had to include, how long they were good, to me there's a lot of confusion about those."
- Kearney: "We had to redo the technical assistance study because the federal program would not accept what was done under Nebraska Weatherization, so there's here on one side you've got the federal regulations for their institutional grants and over here we had the weatherization through the Nebraska Energy Office."
- Kearney: "Do the grants or loans change, do their objectives change because if they don't change with their objectives, why should the previous analysis not be valid?"
- Norfolk: "They will put that money out and say, as long as an engineer puts on paper it's going to payback in four to five years, give them that grant, ..."

It is evident from the above replies as well as other comments throughout the focus group transcripts that a number of respondents were cynical about some of the criteria utilized by the Energy Office in funding or not funding grants or loans from the technical analysis being conducted. One respondent in the Norfolk group recommended in fact, "I think the state ought to hold off giving anybody the money for about three years and use the money to make sure everybody's got an audit, even if they have to pay for it. And they should have the same people doing the school audits so that we're not comparing apples and oranges." This perceived "criteria problem" needs to be addressed by the Nebraska Energy Office and hopefully a more precise set of criteria can be presented to potential participants in a more simplified manner.

A third key theme emerging during the discussion of energy analysis/building audits dealt with what suggestions, if any, consumers would have to the Energy Office for more effectively explaining the specifics of the Nebraska School Loan Program. One of the suggestions that emerged as a theme was a one-page letter that could be mailed directly to administrators, school board members, or maintenance staff/engineers. The following verbatim comments summarize what respondents felt should be the key points in the "one-page letter" or key promotional materials to respondents about the Technical Analysis grant program:

- Kearney: "Well, if they just send the letter and say, we have this program, you know. One page..."
- Kearney: "That you could condense down into one page that most people could understand."
- Kearney: "I think on your letter though, if you have down there as far as the \$2,500 grant is available... so that's probably the first thing."
- Kearney: "Underline for free."

- Kearney: "Yeah, underline grant."
- Kearney: "If the Energy Office themselves would follow-up and say, okay, you would have that grant done and these are the things that were available that you could get fixed, what we can do to help you?"
- Kearney: "Do the analysis for \$2,500. I think that should be on the letter."

The above comments during the Kearney focus group session indicated that a number of respondents would like to see the criteria simplified from a 40 or 50 page booklet down to a one or two page letter that specifically lists what needs to be done to qualify for a technical analysis grant. As one respondent in Kearney said, "It would be nice if the Energy Office, when they send those things out, would have them listed, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 instead of sending out the book of the Energy regulations that's probably 40 or 50 pages long and if you go through and read it to find all that stuff, because most of us aren't going to read it."

A fourth theme emerging during this portion of the discussion dealt with who in the school system should receive information from the Nebraska Energy Office. While most respondents indicated that it is now mainly the administrator/superintendent who receives the vast majority of direct mailings from the Energy Office, there were indications that some participants would like to see the correspondence not only simplified, but also mailed to greater numbers of people. The following verbatim comments indicate that there was not complete agreement on who should be sent the material, but there are also indications that people in addition to the superintendent would like to have more direct communication.

- School Board Member: "Could the mail be directed more toward the school board, I mean, more than just to the superintendent's office? Could it come to all the maintenance people and to the school board president?"
- Superintendent: "I think a VCR tape for 10 minutes that could show my board like the way the agency did when they came out with asbestos, that baby just took the board right there and had them right in their hand. Video tapes that can be presented on audits or on different areas that this can be carried out and you could apply for this or for that and get it and show it to your board. I think that would be a real asset."
- Superintendent: "I would be offended somewhat because I think some administrators get very uptight if a board member has the same kind of information that they have."
- Maintenance Engineer: "The particular situation that I'm in, it seems that the superintendents and principals are basically involved in education. The facilities issues, they rarely touch on. I put all that together for them, otherwise, I don't think they'd do anything with it."
- School Board Member: "As a board member, I wouldn't know whether that's getting done, I don't know whether they're delivering me all the information or just what they want to deliver to me, as far as that goes."
- Principal: "I feel the superintendent should have contacted his principals at one of his meetings and discussed it with them. I, being a principal, a lot of energy information goes straight to the superintendent's office. That's where it goes. And where it should be. A lot of that doesn't get out to the principals."

The above interactions and discussions indicate that there was not total agreement about the best way to communicate with school systems, but it was also evident that many things do not get beyond the superintendent's office when it is mailed only to the superintendent. From a future communication and promotion standpoint, it is our professional opinion that other communication vehicles

besides direct mail to the superintendent's office should definitely be considered when promoting the availability of technical assistance grants and other specifics about Nebraska Energy Office programs.

The final theme emerging during the energy analysis and energy usage session of the focus group dealt with consumer opinions about the Nebraska Energy Office's "energy scorecard" program. Under this program loan participants are required to submit on an annual basis information to the Nebraska Energy Office which documents their energy consumption during the past year. This energy consumption information is used to project "savings or payback" from the improvements which have been made under the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program. While as could be expected, some respondents felt that submitting this information was somewhat of a hassle, it was also encouraging to see that many respondents felt the information is useful and is being shared with other individuals in the community. The following verbatim replies summarize the major response themes to the "energy scorecard" program.

- Lincoln: "We have to fill out forms every year, if I'm not mistaken, for instance, if you've changed boilers or so forth, but I didn't know anything about scorecards but I did know that we have to check with them and they send us forms and we have to fill them out. I didn't know they called them scorecards."
- Lincoln: "Our first year, we had scorecards, without me asking for it and then the last two years we haven't received anything."
- Norfolk: "I don't like it."
- Norfolk: "I don't mind it, but my secretary hates it."
- Lincoln: "Lots of details, Every time I get one of those they say, here we have another one, oh my gosh!"

- Lincoln: "Sometimes it goes into the newspaper. Oh, and to the board."
- Norfolk: "If it's positive, we share it."
- Norfolk: "I think we tell them regardless."

The above verbatim replies indicate that the scorecard program is tolerated by most participants and frequently utilized to communicate savings to people in the community. However, there was also some cynicism on the part of many respondents about the ultimate value of the information received given the difficulty at times to compile the input for the analysis.

Program Specifics

Midway through the focus group sessions respondents were asked for specific recommendations about how they would improve the Nebraska School Energy Loan Program. One of the concepts tested during this part of the discussion was a "shared savings" concept instead of a "loan concept". The moderator indicated to respondents that previously they had indicated a concern about the term "loan". Another way to look at this is that it is really a shared savings program in the sense that you are saving money when you make these improvements. The potential savings is not only benefitting you in the long run, but it is also benefitting the energy usage of everyone. There is a shared value to the school as well as a value to the whole community. The moderator asked:

"What is your reaction if this were talked about in terms of a shared savings program where you would compute the payback, except in payback, we would be looking at savings, you would compute the savings, and how long those savings would have to be incurred before the loan could be paid off, so let's say that the savings shows that you are going to make a \$30,000 improvement in your school, in a period of seven years, you would save \$30,000. Now, it would be a sure savings program in the sense the payback on it wouldn't be seven years, but it would be 14 years so you would get a \$30,000 improvement and then you and the Energy Office would share in the savings. In this sense it would have a 14 year payback. You would be paying back seven years of the savings, the Nebraska Energy Office would be paying for seven years of the savings. Does that have a different kind of connotation to you?"

The following comments indicated some improved acceptance to this new way of explaining the concept, but also some awareness that it was really just a matter of semantics.

- Kearney: "Payback period, 14 years, whatever you want, set your monthly payment on that, that's the way it works. The other to me is just a play with words."
- Lincoln: "Just change the name. Have you ever thought about the forgiveness program? No, I mean, you loan somebody so much money for a project, and if the savings are proven, you forgive certain dollar amounts for dollar saved and then they have to pay it back to you."
- Norfolk: "Proving that savings might be a little tough unless you got down to measuring the degree days and so on. I'm not sure I understand it."
- Kearney: "It's going to cost you the same either way isn't it, the way you said it, the way I interpret it."
- Kearney: "But you were saying extend the date, extending the payment out."

The above comments indicated that the shared savings program concept may have more palatability in terms of a marketing name, but most respondents continued to recognize that it was the same program as the loan program but only under a different name.

One of the major themes emerging during this section of the focus group sessions dealt with concerns about asbestos more so than concerns about the need to save energy. As many of the respondents indicated as outlined below, they were needing to set priorities and right now the asbestos problem was a greater priority:

- Scottsbluff: "It's kind of a matter of priority, but right now, I think the asbestos has taken a front seat."
- Scottsbluff: "If you were sitting here this evening offering loans on asbestos, we'd be right in line for it."
- Scottsbluff: "We have a choice on the energy, on the asbestos, we don't. Federal law mandates it."

- Lincoln: "We do not have staff or people here to do these things and this, as you well or may not know, is the years of asbestos and AIDS and everything else, and that takes time as well as that, all of that comes through my office and I'm here with my secretary and that's it."

- Lincoln: "We've been involved in the asbestos issue this year, how many consulting firms sprung up that are going to do the asbestos inspection for you and you sort through those and you have to try and find one that you feel is going to do a good job."

- School Board Member: "I understand that there are so many, many things to do and we can't keep getting everything out from under the superintendent's office, that's just not possible."

The above comments indicate that school board members and administrators realize that priorities need to be set and that in many ways other issues such as the asbestos issue appear to have a higher priority in their mind than the conserving energy issue. As one board member put it in the Scottsbluff session, "The energy issue today is not the same as it was four or five years ago."

Program Intent

Toward the latter portions of each respective focus group session, respondents were asked what kinds of ongoing assistance they would be interested in after they have applied for a technical assistance grant or applied for loan monies that resulted in facility improvements. Respondents were asked if they would be interested in attending or sending people to an energy management training session. They were also asked why they may or may not have continued with the school loan program after having completed the technical analysis portion of the program.

One of the primary themes emerging as to why respondents may not have followed up their technical analysis grant with application for a loan dealt with the preference to "do it ourselves" rather than going ahead and applying for a loan. The following verbatim comments from the Scottsbluff session in particular indicated this central and western Nebraska theme.

- Superintendent: "I feel I ought to lay something on the table here since I am apparently coming at this in a little different manner than most of the rest. We've been through the auditing and so forth... We really don't have the large projects that we cannot afford to do ourselves. And so our board feels that they don't want to get involved at this time on something that maybe we don't need."
- Norfolk: "The trouble with the loan program though, is the people that can afford to borrow the money can afford to do the work themselves usually."
- Scottsbluff: "We didn't go into it because the payback wasn't that great on it."
- School Board Member: "Well I can't speak for the board members here, but I know that it's been my experience,... You get into something that's really going to cost you a lot of money, we're probably taking buildings that were built in the '20's and 30's and what you can't sell, is hey, \$20,000 here, \$50,000 here, we're running good money after bad because these buildings probably should be replaced."

- Norfolk: "I think on the large projects it's worth the time and effort. However, on many of the smaller projects it's simply more economical for us to do it ourselves."

The above responses reflect a key theme. Many schools feel it is worthwhile to apply for loans on the "big projects", but on the smaller improvements it is simply easier for consumers to "do it themselves" than go through all the paperwork and hassle. In addition, many participants felt that their "big projects" had already been taken care of and that only small improvements could not be made to their energy conservation.

Program Promotion

The final sections of each focus group session dealt with the best ways to inform people in the local schools about the potential benefits and loan application procedures under the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program. While there was a great deal of diversity of opinion as to who should be targeted for receiving promotional materials, it was evident that most respondents recognize that at the current time it is the superintendent's office that is receiving most of the Nebraska Energy Office information.

One of the key findings during the focus group sessions in the outstate areas in particular was the fact that different types of information vehicles are more likely to reach different types of audiences. For example, superintendents often reported that they respond to information they receive in the mail while school board members more frequently reported they depend on what they read in local newspapers. Maintenance/engineering staff indicated that their source of information is primarily what comes through "the grapevine" and what filters down to them from administration.

One of the key promotion ideas or promotion vehicles frequently mentioned by respondents throughout the state was the development of a video tape presentation which could be used by superintendents for school board members. The following verbatim comments emphasize the value that some participants saw in the video tape approach:

- Norfolk: "I think an audio-visual presentation for school boards would be good. Wouldn't have to be very long, just get it on the agenda and give them 15 minutes of that information, at least they are exposed to it."
- Scottsbluff: "How about if you put the workshop or the seminar on a video tape and made it available? Good idea for the smaller schools too."

A second theme that emerged was the perception on the part of central and western Nebraska consumers that their information needs were quite different than the rest of the state. The following verbatim comments indicate the perceptions some consumers have of geographic alienation:

- Scottsbluff: "Out here, our western Nebraska administrators are as good a source of information as we have."
- Scottsbluff: "Anything west of Grand Island, why, we appreciate it. Anybody that comes out, all the way out west."
- Scottsbluff: "Even if they go to western Nebraska, you end up at Kearney, it's still a long way for us to go."
- Scottsbluff: "Even if it ended up at Ogallala, that's further than I'm going to go for a meeting. I'm just not going to go to it."

In summary, while most respondents felt that direct mail to the superintendent's office was still the most appropriate way to send written information, there were indications that people in the outlying parts of the state would like to see greater attendance by the Nebraska Energy Office at regional meetings and at statewide administrator and custodian conventions. Surprisingly, a number of participants were not aware that the Nebraska Energy Office has already made presentations or been available at these annual meetings. Perhaps the most creative idea emerging from the focus group participants was the idea of developing a short video tape presentation which would not only be concise but also very transportable to the more rural areas.

The Decision-Making Process

Throughout the focus group sessions it was evident that the overall decision-making process for applying for grants and loans rests primarily upon the administrator/superintendent. Many board members indicated that they felt it was the superintendent's role to be the focal point for that type of information. Conversely, a number of participants also realized that the administrator/superintendent has a lot of paperwork demands upon his or her time.

One of the primary themes emerging when the decision-making process was investigated was the fact that superintendents appear to be frustrated with the workload to set priorities when they receive so much direct mail material. The following selected verbatim comments indicate the time constraints administrators and superintendents experience:

- Superintendent: "I was just sitting here listening to all this and seeing differences between the board members and me, you'll notice for the most part who's doing all the talking is the superintendents for the most part. We're the ones that get that in the mail, the board members, I don't believe, get any information. I know the information I get is addressed to me... And I sit there and I think, wow, that's just what I need is another 25 hours to sit there and fill out an energy grant. I think that's the bottom line, I really do."

- School Board Member: "The reverse part of that is the state comes out and says every school has to appoint an energy director, and guess who the board is going to appoint? - the superintendent."

- School Board Member: "I've been on the board my fifth year and like I said before, the superintendent gets the information. I sure didn't even know that they had such a plan. So maybe, of course maybe the board presidents do receive a lot of that information but it's never been brought up at our meeting."

The above verbatim comments indicate the frustration school superintendents often face and the suspicion or potential desire school board members have to sometimes know more about these programs.

In summary, it appears that while most consumers feel it is the superintendent's role to receive the information, it is also evident that board members in particular would also like to have "an abbreviated" way to learn more about some of these loan programs. School board members rely on what they read in their local newspapers and the feedback they get from their constituents. If the Nebraska Energy Office can identify an effective way to efficiently communicate the availability of these programs not only to school board members, but also consumers in the community, it is more likely that school superintendents may place higher priority upon going ahead with the application process.

Recommendations

The reader is encouraged to review the transcripts of the verbatim comments in more detail before reaching any final conclusions. However, in the professional opinion of Aiding Better Communications, Inc. the following major themes and recommendations should be considered by the Nebraska Energy Office:

1. Regulations. School officials are very worried about paperwork, so they would be more apt to have interest in the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program if the rules and regulations could be made as simple as possible. Regulation simplification would also appeal to the Governor.
2. School Buses. Vehicles offer some of the greatest opportunities for energy savings to school systems. It seems as though this should be a part of the loan program. If there is a question about this, NEO could request an Attorney General's Opinion. If necessary, NEO could ask the Legislature to provide specific authorization to use the funds for school buses.
3. Shared Savings. Although it's only a matter of semantics, the NEO would probably be well advised to describe its program as a shared savings concept, rather than calling it a no-interest loan. With a regular loan, no net savings are achieved until the loan is paid in full. With shared savings, the argument can be made that the school district realizes half of the energy savings from the very first year and uses the other half of the savings to make repayment to NEO. In material to attract applications, the concepts should be simplistic. Before loan agreements are signed, however, the districts should be fully advised of repayment terms. In the case of a very severe winter where the fuel bill is twice as high after energy improvements as it was in a mild winter before improvements, personnel of some small school districts might not understand how much money they were saving.
4. Video. Comments of participants indicated that it would be a good investment to have a short video explaining the program.

5. Relate To What School Officials Think Is Important. NEO promotion pieces probably shouldn't emphasize energy savings. At present, energy is not a priority subject with school officials. Instead, NEO should use the subjects that are top-of-the-mind with school officials. For example, a promotional piece could be headlined, "Hot to Help Pay for Asbestos Removal", with a subhead explaining that the savings from energy improvements would from the first year help pay for asbestos removal or other projects of high priority to the district.

6. Use Every Available Information Channel. NEO should seek to make presentations to conventions of consulting engineers, school superintendents, school board members and school business managers. Effectiveness of such presentations will be improved if each peer group's members who have used the program give testimonials at these presentations. Evidently, a high percentage of custodians attend seminars at community colleges. This appears to be a good NEO informational target. It would seem worthwhile to mail simple folders that can be read in a few seconds not only to school superintendents but also to principals, maintenance personnel and school board members.