

Nebraska Public Buildings Energy Program

Nebraska Energy Office
Focus Group Summary Report

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PURPOSE

The primary aim of this qualitative research study was to obtain marketing information for use 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 Assistance grants?
- 2) Why do schools, after receiving a Technical Energy 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 Assistance report? Are they aware of a no-interest loan program which could finance the building improvements?

BACKGROUND

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of the Nebraska School Weatherization Program consisted of four focus group sessions. These sessions afforded the Energy Office the opportunity to "listen to" both program participants and non-participants from a geographic statewide standpoint. By including 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.

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 (WRA). WRA utilized its own staff of interviewers to recruit focus group participants by telephone. School representatives were asked if they would be willing to participate in a research group discussion about various programs and services being offered by the Energy Office. Each respondent was offered a \$40 cash honorarium in appreciation for their cooperation as a participant. WRA also sent a follow-up 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 Scottsbluff, 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 School Weatherization Program/Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program and approximately half were non-participants. Respondents were divided into thirds including administrators/superintendents, maintenance/engineering staff, and local school board representatives. 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 geographically representative of the state and

represented program participants versus non-participants, across various levels of potential decision-makers in the application process.

INSTRUMENTATION (DISCUSSION GUIDE)

After a detailed needs assessment with the Energy Office, Wiese Research Associates developed a discussion guide (Appendix GG) 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 focus group session depending upon the interactions of the group.

During a break in each focus group session, the moderator asked 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 used the same discussion guide 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 "focused on" the initial research objectives.

FACILITIES

The first focus group session in Lincoln was conducted with two-way mirror viewing facilities. Representatives of the Energy Office observed the session through the viewing mirror. The first focus group was used to test 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, the decision was made to continue utilizing heterogeneous groups 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 geographic areas, observers from the Energy Office were able to monitor the focus group discussion via an audio room-to-room speaker system. Operationally, the focus group session was conducted in one meeting room and an adjacent meeting room facility was utilized for representatives of the Energy Office to monitor 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 Energy Office were currently listening to the discussion in the 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. It was also felt that the physical presence of Energy Office staff would turn the focus group session into a question-and-answer session on the loan program. Review of the verbatim transcripts indicates that the subsequent discussions were very candid. The tape recording and audio monitoring did not apparently cause any obstructive interference with the interaction of the groups.

FINDINGS

PROGRAM AWARENESS

The first portion of each focus group session dealt with investigating respondents' 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 important 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 negative 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:

- **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 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 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 from information they had gathered five and six years ago under federal or state programs. They were not aware of many of the recent changes in the new state program. Respondents had not conducted audits within the last two to three years or applied for some of the loan monies under the new program. One of the problems in promoting the loan program is that people assume the application process under the older grant program is the same under the revised loan program. Dealing with this confusion of four or five years ago is definitely an obstacle for informing people about the 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. The primary information vehicles recalled were various types of information mailed from the Energy Office and local newspaper releases 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 barriers respondents had experienced when they 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 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. 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, but when the moderator probed respondents to state more specifically their understanding of the programs, it was evident there is 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 high in all four focus groups locations. In the Scottsbluff area, a number of respondents had participated in the program and indicated 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 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 potential savings from working on more energy efficiency did not justify the time, administrative hassles, and overall return on investment for the time and expenses incurred.

GENERAL AWARENESS OF CURRENT ENERGY USE

The second portion of each focus group session dealt with the respondent's perceived awareness of having completed an energy analysis or audit of their school buildings. One of the key issues 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 not sure whether an energy analysis had ever been done in their school district. When the moderator asked respondents how many were "definitely sure" they had conducted an energy 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 had done energy analyses 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 not see the need for updating their energy 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 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 use dealt with perceived conflicts of interest on the part of private consulting firms who had conducted energy analyses in the past. It was evident that among participants who had conducted energy analyses, there were a sizeable number of respondents who were cynical about the audit process 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, and 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 Engineer:** "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 con-

sulting firms was evident from within the total group. When the moderator explained that the new program required the firm conducting the technical analysis not be involved in the actual improvement program, participants often indicated they were not aware of that fact and were pleased with the change.

One respondent in the Lincoln group ask, "Would it be out of line to recommend that the 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 that a registered engineer is on staff at the 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 state and federal programs. While these concerns are no longer necessarily true, the fact that consumers perceive this conflict of interest may also make it more difficult to market the Technical Assistance grant program.

A second theme that emerged during the discussion of energy use dealt with uncertainties or misunderstandings about the Technical Assistance grant program, which offers up to \$2,500 per building to pay for an energy audit. 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 a \$2,500 grant 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 a technical energy 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, . . ."

The above replies, as well as other comments from the focus groups, indicate a number of respondents were cynical about some of the criteria utilized by the Energy Office in funding or not funding grants or loans. 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 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 of energy analysis/building audits dealt with what suggestions the respondents would have for the Energy Office to more effectively explain the specifics of the School Loan Program. One of the suggestions was a one-page letter 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 Assistance 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 assistance 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 dealt with who in the school system should receive information from the Energy Office. While most respondents indicated it is 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 simplified correspondence mailed to a greater number of people. The following verbatim comments indicate there was not complete agreement on who should be sent the material. There are 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. Videotapes 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. It 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 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 there was not total agreement about the best way to communicate with school systems, but it was evident that information does not get beyond the superintendent's office when it is mailed only to the superintendent. 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 Energy Office programs.

The final theme emerging during the energy analysis and energy use session of the focus group dealt with consumer opinions about the Energy Office's "energy scorecard". Under this part of the program, loan participants are required to submit, on an annual basis, energy consumption information. This is used to project savings or payback from the improvements made under the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program. Some respondents felt that submitting this information was burdensome. However, many respondents find the information useful and are sharing it with other individuals in the community. The following verbatim replies summarize the major response themes to the "energy scorecard".

- **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 the scorecard program is tolerated by most participants and frequently utilized to communicate savings to people in the community. However, there was

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

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 "shared savings" instead of a "loan". The moderator reminded respondents that they had indicated a concern about the term "loan". Another way to look at the program is a shared savings program in that the schools share in the savings the energy improvements generate. 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 these 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."

One of the major themes emerging during this section of the focus group sessions dealt with concerns about asbestos more than the need to save energy. Many of the respondents indicated they needed 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 year 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 believe that other issues, such as asbestos, appear to have a higher priority than conserving energy. 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."

NEED FOR ASSISTANCE

Toward the end of each focus group session, respondents were asked why they may or may not have continued with the school loan program after having completed the technical energy analysis portion of the program. One of the primary themes emerging was

the preference to "do it ourselves". 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 easier for the schools to "do it themselves". In addition, many participants felt their "big projects" had already been taken care of and that only small improvements could be made to their buildings' energy efficiency.

In this section of the session, respondents were also asked for their impressions of or interest in ongoing assistance after they had received a technical assistance grant or loan. The respondents generally agreed that technical assistance was beneficial to the proper functioning of any program. However, the answers received from the four sites were so diverse it is difficult to identify any one method or channel of technical assistance which would be most appropriate.

Along the same lines, respondents were asked if they would be interested in attending an energy management training session. There was general agreement that training geared toward the

custodial or maintenance staff would be the most effective. There was some concern from smaller schools as to the cost and the time this training would take. The following verbatim comments reflect these concerns.

- **Lincoln:** "Professional growth for non-certified staff generally does get less attention than the professional staff."
- **Kearney:** "I guess my question is on the smaller level school like we are. How far can we spread that custodial man? You can't afford to send them off every time you turn around, you don't get your work done."

Although respondents agreed to the concept of energy management training, they were very wary of committing to the idea without specifics on goals, cost and time.

PROMOTIONAL CHANNELS

The final section of each focus group session dealt with the best method 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 it is the superintendent's office that is receiving most of the Energy Office information.

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

One promotional idea or vehicle 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 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 western parts of the state would like to see attendance by the Energy Office at regional meetings and at statewide administrator and custodian conventions. Surprisingly, a number of participants were not aware that the Energy Office already made presentations or had 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 is transportable to rural areas.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Throughout the focus group sessions it was evident the overall decision-making process for applying for grants and loans rests primarily upon the administrator/superintendent. Many board members 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 demands upon his or her time. Superintendents appear to be frustrated with the workload when they receive so much direct mail. 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 desire school board members have to know more about these programs.

In summary, 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 a 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 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 following major themes and recommendations reflect the opinions and suggestions made during the focus group sessions.

REGULATIONS

School officials are very worried about paperwork. They would have a greater interest in the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program if the rules and regulations could be made as simple as possible.

SHARED SAVINGS

Although it's only a matter of semantics, the Energy Office would be well advised to describe the program as a shared savings concept, rather than 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 and uses the other half of the savings to make repayment to the Energy Office. In promotional material, the concepts should be simply stated. 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 might not understand how much money they were saving.

VIDEO

Comments of participants indicated that it would be a good investment to have a short video explaining the program.

RELATE TO WHAT SCHOOL OFFICIALS THINK IS IMPORTANT

The Energy Office promotion pieces shouldn't emphasize energy savings. At present, energy is not a priority subject with school officials. Instead, the Energy Office should use the subjects that are "top-of-the-mind" with school officials. For example, a promotional piece could be headlined, "How 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.

USE EVERY AVAILABLE INFORMATION CHANNEL

The Energy Office 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 Energy Office 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.

APPENDIX FA

Wiese Research Associates, Inc,
Omaha, Nebraska

April 28, 1988

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

PROGRAM AWARENESS

Have you ever read, seen or heard anything about the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program?

What can you tell me about the program?

What first comes to mind?

How did you first learn about the program?

Are you aware of any other schools who have received any grants or loans under the program?

You may or may not be aware that you can get grants or loans from the Nebraska Energy Office to pay for a school building energy analysis/audit or to finance the purchasing of more energy efficient heating and cooling equipment for your school.

Would you be interested in learning more about this program? Why or why not?

Would you be interested in applying for such a grant or loan? Why or why not?

What would be the primary factor(s) in your decision as to whether or not to apply for such a program?

Would you be interested in talking to other school officials in your area who have applied for school loans through the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program?

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 regarding the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program?

GENERAL AWARENESS OF CURRENT ENERGY USAGE

Have you ever conducted an energy analysis/audit of your energy usage in your current school building(s)?

Do you feel you have already done everything you can to decrease energy usage in your school's facilities?

Why do you feel you have/have not already done a sufficient analysis?

When was the last time you had an energy analysis/audit done for any buildings in your school district?

Are you aware that up to \$2,500 per building is available from the State Energy Office to pay for an energy audit?

Would you be willing to re-examine or re-analyze your current energy usage knowing that such funds are available?

Why or why not?

Have you ever seen the results of an energy analysis/building energy audit?

Do you feel that the audits you have been provided have been helpful?

Have they been presented in a format that people who are not technically oriented can easily understand?

One, two and three years after actual improvements have been made schools receive a "scorecard" identifying dollar and energy savings resulting from their building improvements. Were you aware of this ongoing "energy scorecard" information?

When you have received these "scorecards", have you shared the information with other people in your school system?

As you have shared the information, how is it used?

When you submit your energy consumption information to calculate the "scorecard", do you view submitting the information as a help or a hindrance?

What suggestions, if any, would you make to the Nebraska Energy Office regarding energy analysis/building audits?

PROGRAM SPECIFICS

If you could design an ideal program for promoting more efficient energy usage in your school building facilities, what would you recommend?

What do you feel are some of the major benefits of the existing Nebraska School Energy Efficiency School Loan Program?

How do you feel the School Loan Program can benefit your school?

Has the program saved money?

Has the program resulted in tax relief?

What do you feel are some of the major shortcomings/problems of the Nebraska Energy efficiency School Loan Program?

How do you feel about the current application process?

Do you feel that the current application procedures for the current no interest loan program are "too burdensome" or do you feel that the application process needs to be streamlined?

What have you heard from others regarding the application procedures?

(If necessary, probe): Do you feel the current no interest loan program is administratively efficient/too complicated? Would you prefer that only a grant program be offered?

PROGRAM INTENT

If you had an updated energy management analysis/audit done for your school facilities which indicated there would be sufficient savings, how likely would you be to go ahead and apply for a no interest loan under the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program?

Why or why not?

Do you feel you are knowledgeable enough to present the benefits of an energy audit analysis to laypeople in terms that they can understand and recognize as benefits?

What kinds of assistance, if any, would you like to have in understanding or learning more about energy analysis/audits that are now available?

What kinds of ongoing assistance would you be interested in after you have applied for loan monies and made facility improvements?

Would you be interested in attending or sending people to an energy management training session?

What would you like to see included in such training sessions?

How should they be planned/constructed?

What benefits, if any, would you see in sending school personnel to periodic energy management training sessions?

PROGRAM PROMOTION

What do you feel would be the best ways to inform you/your organization about the potential benefits and loan application procedures under the Nebraska Energy Efficiency School Loan Program?

(If necessary, probe): How likely would you be to read, hear, or see program information provided to you by:

- 1) direct mail,
- 2) professional association meetings (viz., School Board Association and School Superintendent's Association),
- 3) regional meetings/information seminars,
- 4) word of mouth from other associates in your area,
- 5) the general newspaper/radio/television media?

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

What is the decision-making process in your school district when it comes to applying for these types of no interest loan programs?

Who in your organization is most likely to initiate the loan application process?

Who in your organization is most likely to first notice the potential benefit/need for such a energy efficiency analysis/audit?

Who in your organization would be responsible for preparing the actual loan application and presenting it for final approval?

Who in your organization would make the final decision to apply or not apply?



