

# YOUTH CENTER

## Greening Our Public School Bathrooms?

### Rethink Sits Down with Global Green's John Mejaski

By Lucy Tucker and Isaiah Simms  
*Rethink*

*For millions of city kids, the symbol of everything that stinks in the public schools is the bathroom. Nowhere is this more true than for students in the Crescent City.*

*So it was not so unusual that our own New Orleans Rethinkers decided to radically rethink the public school bathroom. As a summer school project this year, they will design a cutting-edge bathroom and along with it, a system for students to maintain it as a clean and safe space. (No more filth; no more hangouts for bullies.) Perhaps the most unusual aspect about this bathroom is that it will be "green." In fact, when built, the Rethinkers' bathroom will be the first "green" public school bathroom in the USA designed by students themselves.*

*Partnering with Rethink for the design project this summer are YA/YA Inc, Concordia Planning and Architecture, Spirit in Action, New Orleans Outreach and Global Green USA. Below is an interview with John Mejaski, Green Seed Schools Project Manager, Global Green USA..*

Rethink: Can you tell our readers what you mean when you use the word "green" – like for instance, what is a "green school?"

Mejaski: When we use the word "green," we mean a practice that works with nature instead of against it. A green school saves energy and water and other natural resources. The classrooms are healthier and have a better comfort level. One component for improving the environment inside a school is natural lighting. For instance, you can put up overhangs

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outside, over the windows – then the light will come in but not the heat.

Green schools also improve air quality. I went to a school the other day and it had a huge room full of paint cans. You could smell the VOC's (volatile organic compounds). I have also seen blue vinyl tiles in New Orleans' schools that have VOC's in them. Studies say that schools built in a green fashion have about 20% better test scores, a significant reduction in health problems, and make teachers happier.

Rethink. So you have a Green Schools project here. What are you planning to do?

Mejaski: First we are going to select five "Green Seed Schools" and help them improve things like energy and water efficiency and indoor air quality. We will give each of these schools up to \$75,000 to make improvements. After that, we will work on what we call "high performance showcase green schools." Our plan is to select two schools for that project that will receive major green renovations. In the end, we hope that schools in the city and across the state will adopt green building principles.

Rethink: So Global Green is helping us design a green bathroom this summer.

What kinds of things will you teach us?

Mejaski: Well, the big measure of success, at least on paper, is how you will save more energy and water than in a traditional bathroom. We'll look at things like flow reducers for the faucets. And we'll teach you about "low E windows" that let in natural light but keep out the heat and cold. We could consider something like a water cistern on the roof that collects water. Then we could use that water to flush the toilets. That way we don't have to use any chemicals and it



*Part of a series of monthly interviews by Kids Rethinking New Orleans' Schools, or Rethink.*

cuts down on the water we take out of the municipal system. Here you can combine two technologies – low flush toilets and water collection systems. How you put them together...that's where the creativity comes in.

We will teach you about using reclaimed materials and we might suggest embedding some special symbols in the counters or flooring - symbols that will mean something to the kids who use the bathroom. If you add things to the room with good symbolic meaning, kids might want to take better care of it. If your design is good, we plan to use it in one of our "green seed" schools.

Rethink: So this will really be the first green bathroom designed by kids?

Mejaski: Yes, it will be a first. This is very cool, real exciting. You guys will be on the forefront.

*Global Green USA is a national environmental organization that merges innovative research, cutting-edge community based projects and targeted advocacy to create a sustainable future. The Green Schools Initiative is the second major Global Green Initiative in New Orleans. For more info, visit: [www.globalgreen.org](http://www.globalgreen.org).*

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Lucy Tucker/ Rethink Photos

Lucy Tucker, Isaiah Simms and John Mejaski with environmentally-friendly building materials.