

# WILLOW SCHOOL

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the interior never gets above 76 degrees.”

The green lights are just one of many features that make this private school in Gladstone one of the greenest in the country. Of its many dedicated teachers, the most instructive of all might be the buildings themselves, which are known as the Schoolhouse and the Barn.

“When you walk in you have an experience, and by signage and computers you get to see for yourself the alternative to a traditional building,” says Biedron, who, with his wife, Gretchen, founded the K-8 school

When the Schoolhouse opened in 2003, it became the first private-school building in the country (and second overall) to earn a gold certification on the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system. The Barn, which opened last September after a \$3.1 million conversion, contains classrooms, science and performing arts centers, and a cafeteria. The Barn has received the highest possible LEED rating—platinum—the first building of any kind in New Jersey to earn the distinction.

Thought went into every decision. Roof runoff is collected and used to flush the toilets. In addition, says Biedron, “waterless urinals save about 45,000 gallons of water per year.”

Pavement absorbs and radiates heat and blocks rainwater from returning to the ground. Planted areas, on the other hand, are beautiful and also serve an environmental purpose—“letting rain water percolate into the ground and recharge the ground water,” Biedron explains. “So paved areas were kept as small as possible. We tried to balance the need for parking near the

in 2001. “Study after study has shown that children who learn in a healthy building, with natural light and fresh air, score as much as 20 to 30 percent higher than those in conventional buildings.”

At 56, Biedron is a whirlwind of energy, striding purposefully around the school’s 34 acres, pausing only to explain yet another of its green features. After studying business at the University of Vermont, Biedron went to work for his family’s industrial paint manufacturing business. It was there he first learned about green building, through the demand for paints that were low in volatile organic compounds (VOCs). When he sold the company in 1995, he turned a hobby converting old barns into another business, and that taught him about recycling wood.

When he and his wife decided to build a school, he thought that regeneration might provide the perfect core idea to link all the things the school aspires to teach. In studying the environment, children would learn about nature and science, of course, but also about history and art and ethics.

buildings with our desire not to create unnecessary impervious surfaces.”

Thousands of people have toured the school. The computer in the front hall always generates interest. It monitors maintenance systems, Biedron says, “so children can see how much rainwater we harvest, how much on-site renewable energy we produce from our solar panels, and how much energy we use to heat and cool the building.”

Biedron has talked to thousands of others to spread the word about sustainability or, as he prefers to call it, “regeneration.”

“As we think about our next building, we are looking beyond sustainable design and green building, to a way of thinking that is regenerative,” he says. “We want to design a ‘living’ building that actually gives back more energy than it uses, harvests more water than it needs, and improves the health and well-being of both man and nature.” ■

Contributing writer Merrell Noden lives in Princeton. He profiled string theory avatar Ed Witten in December.

NICE TO HAVE YOU BACK:

Recycled wood and stone were used throughout the building.

