Walking the Talk
Going All-in for Sustainable, Responsible Impact Investments

The Northwest School's long-held commitment to sustainability comes full circle in its purchasing policy, dining, facilities, transportation and, most recently, its investment policy.

Living up to a school’s mission is never simple, particularly when it calls for aligning the school’s investments with its deepest values.

At The Northwest School, a core piece of our mission is a commitment to environmental sustainability. This isn’t window dressing. In 1971, one of our three co-founders, Mark Terry, wrote a book called “Teaching for Survival” that argued all education is environmental education, no matter what the subject or field trip activity. To instill the idea that all individuals are responsible for caring for the space they occupy, the school has always had what we call the Environment Program: Every student participates in cleaning and caring for the school’s physical plant and grounds three times a week, all year long. Students are encouraged to follow this practice and ethic when out in the neighborhood, city, wilderness and beyond.

Three years ago we doubled down on our commitment to sustainability. We hired a director of environmental education and sustainability. We developed a purchasing policy, guiding departments to research and then request bids from sustainable companies and vendors before making final purchasing decisions. Our students designed, built, planted and now manage an organic urban farm and garden. Our dining hall program serves freshly cooked meals from scratch every day, eliminated all single-serving packaged goods, and increased organic and local sourcing. We are working with students to develop a greenhouse gas inventory of our school’s operations and transportation. Our facilities department exchanged its maintenance van for an electric vehicle, and we recently embarked on changing all our light bulbs to LEDs. Several of these endeavors qualified The Northwest School for Washington Green Schools certification in 2017.

Despite all these efforts, there was one area we had long-overlooked — our financial investments.

Like most independent schools, we knew we had to protect and grow our endowment. We could not compromise our fiduciary responsibility, particularly given its sole purpose: to help fund our financial aid program. At the same time, we are an educational institution devoted to developing thoughtfully engaged citizens who are passionate about caring for natural systems. Furthermore, the school’s last strategic plan, adopted in 2012, specifically called for every effort to align the school’s environmental practices with its values.

Two years ago, our board plunged into research and robust debate, and after 18 months revised our investment policy to focus on investing in companies that “are generally consistent in their operations with the school’s mission, philosophy, and values. These values include environmental stewardship, adherence to human rights, and sound corporate governance.”

Another key step was to put out an RFP to 12 firms to help us better meet our goals. We selected Ballard, an institutional asset management firm with deep expertise in sustainable, socially responsible impact investing.

One hundred percent of the school’s investments are now divested from fossil fuels and other heavily polluting industries, as well as alcohol, tobacco, gaming, adult entertainment, weapons and nuclear energy. In addition, our portfolio eschews companies with patterns of egregious behavior around equity and human rights, and those with fewer than one woman on their boards.

Now that we have made this commitment, it feels like a no-brainer. The world is facing an existential crisis. There is great tension between what our environment needs to survive and the policies and behavior of the fossil fuel industry and current administration. We feel it is non-negotiable that the practice of sustainable living be a part of children’s learning. Most leadership in sustainable investing thus far has been in higher education. Independent secondary schools bear the same responsibility. We believe we can reap returns while doing good.