The school board approved an important contract recently, one that could save the schools a lot of money on energy costs. I'd like to explain how the contract works, because I think there might be some incorrect perceptions in the community.

The contract is with a company called Energy Education Inc., based in Texas. They help large school districts like ours save money on energy costs. They have been in business for 23 years. (The company was actually started by a Wichita Falls, Texas school board member who was so successful helping his district save money on energy he started a business to help others.) We called a number of school districts that have worked with them, and they all told us the energy savings they realized were substantial.

What they do is design an energy conservation program that's customized for us, to help us reduce our consumption of electricity, natural gas, fuel oil, and water. It is much, much more than turning off the lights when you're not using them. They evaluate more than 1,200 areas of energy consumption.

The key is that the changes are sustained over the long term because they become part of the system, the culture, and organization behavior. It's not a program that saves money for just a few months while it's a focus of management attention. They express it like this: "We get everyone in your complex organization to do every day for years what you struggle to get your own family members to do for just one day in your own home.

The changes focus on peoples' behavior – and some significant behavioral changes are expected. The company does not come in and start installing new equipment with large up-front costs. They start by sending in a team of their own people to assess our facilities and how we operate in them. Then they begin a communications program to coordinate the necessary behavior changes throughout our 13 facilities. They train an energy manager, a new, part-time position, to be the on-site leader of the program. Then there is a measurement and verification component, to make sure we're getting the savings we should be.

We have signed a four-year contract with the company. We will purchase energy management software and will pay Energy Education a monthly fee. Those are our out-of-pocket expenses, along with the part-time energy manager position. Energy Education guarantees that our savings will be greater than those expenses, from the first year on. If they're not, they will write us a check for the difference. Other school districts we spoke to said their savings, even after the fees and salary expense, were substantial. That is what we're hoping for, because it would provide funds we can invest in our students' education.

Published in the Fairfield Echo, Jan. 1, 2009..