A Home Energy Audit

Activity Overview

Grade Level: 6-8
Activity: M-5

General Description

Students will review processes and components involved in energy efficiency in buildings which involves the construction, maintenance and design features of the home. Students will apply these concepts by performing an energy audit in their homes, and construct a simple tool called a draft meter.

Learning Outcome

Students will recognize energy conservation design features in buildings, use energy conservation vocabulary, make and record observations, and conduct a simple energy audit.

Subjects

Science, social studies, home economics, technology

Process Skills

Observation, measurement, grouping facts, conducting research, working in teams

Duration

One class to review vocabulary
One weekend assignment for collecting data
One class to develop recommendation sheet
One class for discussion and review

Key Vocabulary

(See vocabulary sheets)

Curriculum Standards

Texas (TEKS):
112.22.b.6.9, 112.23.b.7.14
Louisiana (LSCS):
PS-M-C8
Arkansas (ASCF):
3.1.20, 3.1.25
National (AAAS Project 2016):
The Designed World – 8th

Materials

- 2 Vocabulary sheets: "Heat Bandits" and "Energy Savers"
- 2 Energy Audit Data Sheets: Interior and Exterior
- Materials to make a draft detector: pencil, tape, and tissue paper or thin plastic

Method

1. Go over the two vocabulary sheets and discuss them with the rest of the class to be sure you understand each of them.
2. Make a draft detector to use during your energy audit
3. Using the Interior and Exterior Data Sheets, complete the observations on your house, apartment, or a building suggested by the teacher. Use the draft detector to help locate air infiltrations.
4. Develop a set of recommendations for improving energy conservation in the house, apartment, or building that was studied. List alternatives whenever possible, so that the owner has choices in making conservation improvements.
5. Compare observations with other students in order to improve your study. Revise your improvements sheet based on these discussions.

Background

We spend most of our time in buildings -- homes, schools, offices, and stores. But most people hardly notice details about the buildings, such as how they are designed, how they are built, and how well they are maintained. These details have a strong effect on how much we enjoy a building and how much it costs.

An "energy-efficient" building is more comfortable than a wasteful building. It needs less fuel for heat and less electricity for cooling. A building that is badly designed and poorly kept up wastes money. Why? Because it is trying to heat and air-condition the outdoors as well as the indoors.

This activity turns you into an instant BUILDING INSPECTOR. Your assignment: Identify whatever helps or hurts energy conservation in a specific building. You can become a kind of detective looking for "bad guys" that waste energy and money.

Discussion/Questions

1. Why were buildings built for so long without regard for energy conservation? Why are some buildings still being constructed that way?
2. Did our ancestors, in colonial times or in other countries, use energy conservation to make their homes more comfortable? Give example.
3. What "Energy Savers" are most important for summer cooling?
4. How could convection be used to help with summer cooling?
5. What useful energy conservation building features were not covered in this activity?
6. Describe the "Energy Efficient House of the Future." How would it be designed, oriented, landscaped, and managed?
7. How many of the items on the Energy Savers list are inexpensive and easy to install?
8. Why are most building lots landscaped the way they are? Do good energy conservation principles generally seem to be used?
9. The locations of most windows in a dwelling are related to the need for light inside and the desire of those designing the home for balance and appeal. What effect would conservation practices have on window locations?
10. For what purposes is hot water really needed in a home? What are the reasons for many people using more hot water than they really need?
11. If a homeowner had only a limited amount of money, what energy savers do you think would help most for the least money?

Vocabulary Sheet: Heat Bandits

Radiation: Passage of energy through open space, like sunlight. During the daytime a building absorbs solar radiation, but after the sun goes down, it starts to reradiate heat to the cold outside air unless something is done to block the radiation.

Conduction: Passage of heat through a material. Some materials, like glass and metal, conduct heat (and lose it) easily. Insulation helps to block conduction of heat. If ceilings and walls are poorly insulated, they conduct heat from the house to outside.

Convection: Transfer of heat by movement of air. As heated air contact cold surfaces such as windows, it loses heat. The cooled air is denser than warm air, so it tends to settle, pushing warm air toward the ceiling. These temperature changes and air movements form a pattern. Warm, light air from the ceiling area is chilled along the window, becomes heavier and drops to the floor. It moves across the floor, is reheated, moves up the opposite wall, (away from the window), across the ceiling and down past the window again. Each cycle the air loses heat. Heat must be supplied from a sunny window, a furnace, stove, or other heater to maintain a comfortable temperature.

Condensation: Beads of moisture that form on surfaces as warm, moist air is cooled. Moisture condensing from room air (showers, breathing, cooking, etc. provide the moisture) shows up most on the cooled areas. Wet or frozen windows are reminders of wasted heat. The cures are double or even triple glazing of windows, heavy drapes, insulating shades, or sliding panels.

Air infiltration: Air seepage due to wind. Air pressure pushes cold air in through tiny openings on the windy side and draws heated air out of the opposite side of the house. Drafts occur through wallboard cracks, gaps around paneling (top, bottom, and sides), cutouts for pipes and wiring, poor seals for window sashes, badly weather-stripped doors, and loose molding at bottoms of walls.

Vocabulary Sheet: Energy Savers

Insulation: Material with high resistance (R-value) to heat flow. Some commonly used materials for home insulation are fiberglass, cellulose, rock wool, and styrofoam. The resistance to heat flow is provided by the many small dead air spaces between the fibers or particles. Insulation comes in as variety of forms: blankets, or batts, foam, boards, or small loose pieces.

R-value: The factor which tells how much resistance to heat flow a material has. The higher the R-value, the greater the insulating efficiency of the material. R-values are commonly stated per inch of building material. R-values are additive -- thicker material or a combination of materials means increased resistance to heat flow.

Approximate R-value per inch of thickness for common insulation materials:

Material	"R" per inch thickness
Flexible	
Cellulose fiber with vapor barrier	3.20-4.00**
Glass fiber or mineral wool	3.00-3.40**
Loose Fill	
Glass fiber or mineral wool	2.80-3.40
Cellulose	3.50-3.70
Vermiculite, expanded	2.13
Rigid Board	
Polystyrene, extruded	5.26
Expanded urethane, preformed	5.80-6.25
Glass fiberboard	4.00
Polystyrene, molded beads	3.57
Foamed-in-Place	
Expanded urethane, sprayed	6.25

* Determined from ASHRAE Handbook, 1972
** Varies according to density and fiber diameter

R-value standards for an efficient house: Ceiling: R-33; Exterior Wall: R-19; Floor: R-22;

Vapor barrier: A waterproof liner used to prevent passage of moisture through the building structure. Vapor barriers in walls and ceilings should be located on the heated (indoor) surface of the building. Some insulations come with a vapor barrier attached.

Window treatments: Applications to the interior side of windows (blinds, shades, shutters, draperies), used to save energy by keeping heat in or out.

Damper: A trapdoor or other device which controls the passage of air through a duct, chimney, or stovepipe.

Flow restrictor: A device attached to a water nozzle or shower head to reduce the flow of water while maintaining the pressure of the spray. This saves energy by cutting down on the amount of hot water being used.

Clock thermostat: A thermostat equipped with a timer to change temperature levels automatically at certain times of day. It helps to save energy by turning down the heat at night and during the hours when people are usually out of the house.

Roof overhang: A solid horizontal or angled projection on the exterior of a building placed (ideally) so that it shades southern windows in summer only, when the sun is high in the sky. This saves on air-conditioning. (To determine the approximate size overhang needed, add the height of the window to the distance from the top of the window to the overhang, and divide by 2.)

Windbreak: A dense row of trees, or a fence or other barrier that interrupts and changes the local path of the wind. Windbreaks located on the north and west sides of a building can save heat by reducing wind chill and air filtration.

Air lock entry: A porch, vestibule, or entry hall with an inner door and an outer door at the entrance of a house or building. The two doors save energy by cutting down on air exchange when people go in or out.

Caulk: A soft, semi-solid material that can be squeezed into nonmovable joints and cracks of a building, thereby reducing the flow of air into and out of the building.

Weather-stripping: Material which reduces the rate of air infiltration around doors and windows. It is applied to the frames to form a seal with the moving parts when they are closed.

Home Energy Audit – Data Sheet

Name or location of building inspected: _____

Interior:	Yes	No	Does Not Apply (Or Comments)
1. Are the ceilings insulated? (In apartments, ask the superintendent or building owner for details.)			
2. How thick is the insulation? (Check with ruler in attic or crawl space. Tell in inches - last column.)			
3. Is there a vapor barrier (plastic, aluminum, or heavy brown paper) on the indoor side of the insulation?			
4. If the building is on a slab or has an unheated basement, does the first floor have insulation under the floors?			
5. If the basement is heated, are the basement walls insulated?			
6. About how much of the floor is covered with rugs, padding, and carpeting? (per cent of fraction)			
7. Are heating and cooling equipment (ducts, grilles, radiators) blocked by furniture, rugs, drapes, etc.?			
8. Are walls and ceilings light enough in color to reflect light well?			
9. Are insulating drapes or other tight window treatments such as framed shades in place?			
10. Are these insulating drapes or other tight window treatments such as framed shades in place?			
11. If there is a fireplace, does it have a damper and glass doors?			
12. Is the damper closed when the fireplace is not in use?			
13. Are the glass doors kept closed during fireplace use to keep warm room air from escaping up the chimney?			
14. Does the draft detector move when placed along edges of doors and windows on calm and windy days?			
15. On windy days does the draft detector show air currents through electrical outlets placed on outside walls?			
16. Check other openings for drafts, and make a list of drafty openings. EXAMPLES: plumbing pipes entering walls, exhaust fans in kitchen or bathroom while OFF, chimney pipes exiting through walls or ceilings.			
17. Are hot water faucets free from drips?			
18. Have flow-restrictors been placed in pipes connected to showerheads?			

Interior (Continued):	Yes	No	Does Not Apply (Or Comments)
19. Is there a clock thermostat adjusted to "set-back" (lower) temperatures automatically at bedtime?			
20. Check the cellar for exposed hot water or steam pipes. Are they all insulated?			
21. Check cellar or attic for ducts carrying heated air. Are they wrapped with insulation?			
22. Check baseboard-type radiators. Are openings or metal fins inside blocked or filled with dust?			
23. Is the exhaust hose from the clothes dryer detached from its vent and run through a filter to keep warm, damp air inside the house?			
24. Has the furnace been cleaned and serviced in the last year?			

Exterior:	Yes	No	Does Not Apply (Or Comments)
1. Are there fewer windows on the north side of the building?			
2. Are the north windows smaller than those on the other sides?			
3. Does the roof on the south side extend out from the house far enough to block summer sun from walls and windows?			
4. Will the roof overhang allow the lower winter sun to warm south walls and windows?			
5. Are there storm windows in place and tightly sealed? (If large amounts of moisture condense on the inside of windows and freeze on coldest days storm windows are not working properly.)			
6. If there are no storm windows, are there temporary (plastic) barriers installed? (They should create an air space about 3/4 of an inch thick between inner and outer glazings.)			
7. Are evergreen shrubs and trees planted as windbreaks around the north and west sides of the building?			
8. Are deciduous (leaf shedding) trees planted on the south side for summer shade and winter sun?			
9. Does snow melt more quickly on your roof than it does on similar houses nearby? (Indicates need for more ceiling insulation).			
10. Can you see spaces for air leaks between the house and its foundation, broken windows, rotted boards or other sources of cold air leaks into the cellar or crawl space?			
11. Are cellar doors insulated and tight-sealing?			
12. Are attic vents open summer and winter? (Unless the attic is paneled and occupied, vents should be open. Ceiling insulation should keep your house warm, not a sealed attic. Vents from ceilings of rooms below into the attic should be open in summer, but closed and insulated in winter.)			

Exterior (Continued):	Yes	No	Does Not Apply (Or Comments)
13. Are cracks and joints around windows, doors, stairways, pipes, and electrical wires caulked?			
14. Is there weather-stripping around the inner and outer doors? Around the windows?			
15. Are cracks in walls and foundations sealed and holes plugged in?			
16. Is there an air lock entry hall, double door, or insulated storm door at each outside entrance?			

Assessment

Complete one activity listed below and make a class presentation board:

1. Take a list of recommendations you developed (Procedure, Step 4), and find out how much they would cost to implement. Take the necessary measurements, and check with a hardware or building supply center to get prices.
2. Take photos of good conservation practices and poor conservation practices related to a building that you have studied. Arrange the photos of poor practices next to diagrams that illustrate how they can be eliminated. Photos of good practices could be displayed with captions explaining why they are good.
3. In a single color, sketch the landscape around a building that you have observed. Using a contrasting color, sketch in plantings that may improve energy conservation by reducing air infiltration in the winter or providing shade in the summer.
4. Design a blueprint or model of a building which incorporates the energy conservation features you have identified.

Source: "Conserve & Renew" (1996) California Energy Commission.