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- [Opinion](#)
- [Video](#)
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Features

Teaching for the future

By Sue White

ABC Environment | 23 Mar 2010



School. Credit: iStockphoto.

Teachers keen to integrate sustainability into their classrooms no longer face a dearth of inspiration or resources.

"Sustainability education used to be very ad hoc; it was only taught when there was someone passionate about it." So says Vanessa Whelan, ACT coordinator for the Australian Sustainable Schools initiative (AuSSI), a partnership between federal, state and territory governments.

"Things have come a long way in the last five or six years. Sustainability is now recognised as an important way of giving real-life meaning to lessons," she says.

For many teachers struggling to compress dozens of mandated key learning areas into an already-bursting curriculum, the idea of educating students about the environment often fell into the too-hard basket.

No resources, no time and no interest killed it off faster than an endangered animal on a highway.

But the teaching of sustainability in education is no longer in a rare beast. Resources for teachers wanting to weave sustainability into units of work are readily available if you know where to look, and inspirational examples abound across the country.

The curriculum question

Although a national curriculum is being drafted, states and territories have already begun tackling the topic of sustainability. Schools in the ACT have been particularly enthusiastic: 112 schools now have sustainability representatives and since 2007 the Territory's curriculum has mandated sustainability education.

"The ACT now has curriculum frameworks and units of work on water, waste, biodiversity and climate change. They've been picked up by schools across the country," says Whelan.

When initial drafts of the upcoming national curriculum failed to give sustainability the emphasis some educators believe is vital, groups such as the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) began vocal lobbying. They appear to have a result. Sustainability is now proposed as one of three cross disciplinary perspectives in the national curriculum, along with Asian literacy and indigenous education.

Maureen Bartle, an education consultant who has worked extensively in curriculum support in the ACT believes that teaching sustainability will be enhanced under a national, cross-curricular approach. But, like others in the field, she is understandably reluctant to praise a curriculum that is still being drafted and redrafted:

"The imperative is to get sustainability embedded into the school-based curriculum," she says.

The AAEE are also only cautiously optimistic at this stage. "ACARA [the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority] says the way it will be set up will make sustainability visible and explicit. We hope so," says AAEE President Phil Smith.

Getting started now

Teachers may have packed schedules, but they've also got sustainability role models who have been plugging away for years to produce results and resources.

After 15 years focussing on sustainability, the two-teacher, 40-student Burrumbuttock Primary School in NSW punches way above its weight on the subject.

After humble beginnings prompted by a visit from a local Landcare coordinator in 1990, the school community has built an adjoining environmental education centre that's visited by almost 3,000 students a year as well as educators from across the globe.

The secret, according to principal Owen Dunlop, is to think bigger than the school walls:

"Get the class involved in local environmental issues, not just those within the school; harness energy from experts within the community; and invite external people to get involved in the teaching and learning," he says.

Dunlop believes success only comes when projects don't rely on one person, and emphasises Burrumbuttock Primary has numerous people driving its sustainability centre. He also reminds planners not to forget the students: "I've got to remember to sometimes take my principal's hat off and let momentum come from underneath. That could be through student forums or by getting the students as involved as possible in things like preparing proposals," he says.

While the approach actively engages students there's an additional pay off: "I've found groups like Landcare, agencies and service clubs like Rotary will be supportive where schools can come up with an authentic project that involves students and change."

Scientifically speaking

Once sustainability becomes a school focus, teachers have found integrating it into topics beyond science is easier than it sounds:

"Sustainability also works in SOSE [Studies of Society and Environment], visual arts, literacy and technology," says Jill Buscombe, a primary school teacher in the ACT.

"In English we align it with what students are reading, writing, listening to and speaking about."

Debates, journals written outside, field trips to landfill sites and action are all part of an integrated approach. "Our units always end by taking meaningful action. Students have to believe they can make a difference. At the end of our waste unit I've seen six and seven year olds decide to make a worm farm," Buscombe says.

While Burrumbuttock's Dunlop admits change is easier in a small school, Victoria's Frankston High School is leading the way in reducing the footprint of larger sites. With 1,800 students spread across two campuses, Frankston's sustainability coordinator, Georgia Cowan, admits getting everyone onboard isn't an easy ride.

Nonetheless, over the last 18 to 24 months they've managed to integrate sustainability lessons into geography, science, maths and English. Students have conducted carbon footprints of their homes, studied renewable and non-renewable energy systems, and the school is cooperating with their local council in a climate change program which will soon be widely available to other schools. As they continue to push integration across the curriculum, the wins slowly stack up: "Our food technology classes recently started composting," Cowan says.

Bartle also believes integration works. "Take the issue of providing food for a growing population in a time of climate change. We build the science by talking about soils, types of production and the band of vegetation where crops currently grow; in geography we show how these areas are moving; and economics classes encourage students to look at cost effectiveness of these things."

The importance of optimism

If it all sounds optimistic, that's quite deliberate, according to Bartle. "We're very keen on students having a sense of optimism, tempered with realism," she says.

Adds Whelan: "This is about giving students some hope for their own future and making them active participants in it."

RESOURCES

Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative's website contains state and territory AuSSI contacts plus a plethora of teaching resources (including teaching plans) available for download.

www.environment.gov.au/education/aussi

The ACT's sustainable schools site offers highly-regarded resources from units of work through to signage for the school's compost bins. www.sustainableschools.act.gov.au

Learn from Burrumbuttock Primary School's oft-awarded sustainability efforts at

www.wirraminna.org. Their Living River DVD (produced by students for students, about the Murray-Darling Basin) has been distributed to 2,000 schools and is available via download or hardcopy.

The Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering has a program on renewable energy designed to make science relevant to kids www.stelr.org.au

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- **Andrew :**

29 Mar 2010 10:19:16am

We've been working with an EfS program at UNSW for 12 consecutive years. The Sustainable Living Challenge (sustainableliving.com.au) is an annual program partnered with UNEP and the Decade of Ed for Sustainable Development.

The Teach Sustainability portal (teachsustainability.com.au) grew out of this program and is a great resource for teachers to share teaching resources.

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- **Sue E :**

28 Mar 2010 8:33:52pm

Yes it is great to read of initiatives in the school sector, but the early childhood sector is also increasingly engaged in EfS with very little support from government or organisations beyond the sector. EfS begins at birth not school and this must be recognised for an EfS continuum to occur throughout life.

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- **Katie B :**

27 Mar 2010 4:57:59pm

Thank you for such an interesting a well informed article!

It is so encouraging to hear from the innovative thinkers in education, and to see how they are transforming environmental awareness in to all areas of school curriculum!

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- **Kate :**

24 Mar 2010 2:40:52am

Hi Sue,

This is so encouraging! With the awareness of ecology as a greater issue for the planet, environment needs to be incorporated into school curriculum.
Glad to see it happening!

Kate

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