

# Making sustainability sustainable

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## Planting the seeds

In my work as a member of the Independent Education Union's Environmental Committee, I'm fortunate enough to speak to many passionate environmental educators through a range of different sectors. There's no uniformity to the group beyond their determination to ensure that the young people in their care have every opportunity to understand their role within the environment and how their actions can positively – and negatively – influence the natural world. It's been a pleasure hearing their ideas about how sustainability and environmental education can best be delivered, and it has also been educative hearing about their frustrations with some hurdles that they've had to overcome. In the interests of engendering further discussion, I thought I would share some of the key issues I've identified.

Sustainability and environmental education is an area that is of growing interest to schools and early childhood centres. Environmental education has a long history, and this was reflected in the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008), which stated that one of the goals of education was the development of 'active and informed citizens' who 'work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments' (p. 10). More recently, this goal was translated into content in the Australian Curriculum in the form of the sustainability cross curriculum priority, which requires young people to develop 'the knowledge, skills, values and world views necessary for people to act in ways that contribute to more sustainable patterns of living.' (Australian

Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015). Crucially, the Australian Curriculum emphasises an activist notion of sustainability education. Students must not only understand and appreciate their environment, but they must participate critically and act creatively 'in determining more sustainable ways of living.'

This is an important notion, and well worth inclusion within Australia's national curriculum, but it does pose a significant challenge for schools and teachers in how to implement this cross-curricular priority. Too often, in my experience, sustainability is left in the hands of one particular teacher, and the success or failure of the program relies entirely on their efforts and determination. This means that, if the teacher moves on, then the program will likely fail as there might not be anyone else to take it on. In this era of workload intensification, it's important to make sustainability education a sustainable endeavour, in and of itself. Below I outline some of the best pieces of advice and sources of information that I've seen.

## From little things...

The first and perhaps most obvious piece of advice that I would offer is to start off slowly. There is no reason that participation needs to be a whole school endeavour – at least at the start of any sustainability initiative. Too often, schools want to institute a whole school program – and that rapidly becomes too much work to manage, and the program fails to reach its full potential. Instead, it's far better to embed sustainable practices within one small area of a school or early learning centre, and grow from there, rather than trying to change a whole school's culture overnight.

Some of the most successful examples of sustainability initiatives have started in the early years of school. For example, a Catholic school that I visited recently implemented a roster where Year 1 students had the responsibility for maintaining the worm farms. As the Year 1 students moved into Year 2, they took on a new role involving composting waste, while the new Year 1 students became the worm farm guardians. There are plans for another role for the students when they move into Year 3. This kind of well-planned and carefully paced approach ensures that the sustainability program becomes an intrinsic part of the whole school, rather than a bolted on extra.

## ... big things grow

Of course, there are also incredible whole-school projects that can – and should – be undertaken. These can be hugely effective, even when they are quite simple. A really good example of this is changing the way that students think about waste. This can be done by changing the bins that are used in schools from opaque to clear. This means that students must consider the waste that they are producing – which can lead to a whole-school change in behaviour. This was the case at an independent school in south west Sydney, which successfully applied for funding to replace all of their garbage bins with transparent ones. The result was a significant decrease in the amount of plastic waste produced by students (and staff).

Another good example is the use of solar panels on schools. This is becoming increasingly common, and there are, or have been, a number of different grants that schools can apply for in order to install solar panels. Recently, Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta installed solar panels across 19 schools in Western Sydney, which is estimated to save the system significant amounts of money in the coming years.

However, while the installation of renewable energy sources is a good thing in and of itself, it's even more effective when combined with student action about those. Students can and should be involved in monitoring the school's use of energy – and ideally in a more meaningful sense than just making sure projectors are switched off at the end of each day.



### Take a cutting

Another valuable piece of advice is to think beyond the normal channels of schools and early learning centres. In particular, it can be a valuable activity to reach out to local community groups who can share resources, funding and expertise with neophyte environmental groups. A valuable source of information are local permaculture groups or community garden networks, who often are only too willing to share their expertise with young environmentalists. This can be especially helpful when teachers or support staff in schools do not have a large body of knowledge to draw on.

In addition, there are more formal organisations that might be of use to educators. These can take the form of professional organisations, like the Australian Association of Environmental Educators, or more informal groups like those that exist on Facebook or other social media platforms. Some of these organisations

(including the IEUA NSW/ACT) also run conferences and Teachmeets, which are great opportunities to hear from practicing teachers about their efforts in this arena – and to take a few tips away to use in your own practice.

There are also a range of different organisations that provide information, resources and training to school students, and it's worth making contact with these, too. For example, Mobile Muster does some fantastic work around recycling mobile phones. Often, this information is free – which is an important consideration for schools and early learning centres!

### Watch it grow

Finally, when you're ready, don't be afraid to apply for grants to build the scale and scope of your sustainability endeavours. There are a surprising number of these available to educators, and they are always worth applying for; often organisations

are keen to give the money to schools and centres. When applying, it's best if you have a clear goal outlined for the use of the money, and it's a good idea to have a plan for how you will implement the project, measure its success and share that success widely. Teachers Mutual Bank is one excellent source of grants for environmental and sustainability projects.

### References

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]. (2015). *Sustainability*. Retrieved from [www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/sustainability/](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/sustainability/)
- Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], (2008). *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, December 2008*. Retrieved from [http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/National\\_Declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Educational\\_Goals\\_for\\_Young\\_Australians.pdf](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf)

