

Sustainable Schools NSW Case Studies of Good Practice

Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre(WEEC) Burrumbuttock Public School

This case study on Burrumbuttock Public School (BPS) as developed from an interview with Owen Dunlop, Principal and a range of materials, including the School Environmental Management Plan, and some media reports. The story of the WEEC highlights the strengths of close school-community relationships and, importantly, the creativity and expertise that exist in a school's broader community. It also shows how quality sustainability initiatives can be the source of quality teaching and learning.

School Community

Burrumbuttock is a small town located about 30ks north-west of Albury, in southern NSW. The 2-teacher, 40-student primary school draws its enrolments from a local village of about 150 residents and from the surrounding rural community.

The size of the school means there are fewer community stakeholders and *it's easier to and initiate change in a small community. We can be more flexible, and inspiration around good ideas can spread easily. Quick action is possible!* After ten years of school-based sustainability actions, BPS is having the sustainability impact of a school many many times its size. This is a positive thing: *it is among world leaders in the way in which we provide environmental education.*

Owen's comments are based on experiences here in NSW with the pilot phase of the Sustainable Schools Program and on the extensive international investigations he conducted in 2005 with support from a Premier's Scholarship. The report, ***Environmental Education in UK and Scandinavian Schools***, focused on the influence of corporate and community partnerships on the capacity of schools to undertake sustainability education and action.

The Project - WEEC

Wirraminna was originally a 4 ha stock reserve and a public watering place. This area is adjacent to the school and it includes a dam constructed in 1902 and a patch of White Box woodland. By the early 1990s the reserve, largely neglected, was covered with weeds and illegally-dumped rubbish; the fences were long past standing upright! Members of the Burrumbuttock community and West Hume Landcare group recognized an opportunity to develop this area and highlight the issue of native vegetation loss and its impact on wildlife and developing dryland salinity.

From the school's perspective, the project grew from a seed sown in 1990 when the recently formed West Hume Landcare Group's coordinator visited the school and invited staff and students to think about environmental issues such as water quality, salinity, habitat loss and threatened species. A seed-collection day was held; this was followed by Saltwatch activities and a visit to a local saline discharge site. Over the next few years, propagating 100s of native trees and shrubs each year for roadside revegetation became routine for Burrumbuttock school students. The school referred to its involvement under the title of Junior Landcare, and parents, students and staff attended a Junior Landcare conference in Devenish, Victoria in 1992.

By 1994, general community support for developing the bush reserve adjacent the school was in full swing. A school excursion to Wagga's Riverina Environmental Education Centre and a visit from the *Royal Botanic Gardens Goes West* program enticed the school to include the bush reserve as an integral part of teaching and learning. The possibilities for outdoor learning and environmental study inspired the school's very active involvement in the development of Wirraminna from that time

on. Significantly, a solid metal fence, which separated the school from Wirraminna, was replaced with a low mesh fence and Wirraminna became – visually – an extension of the school. North Albury Rotary club erected a shadehouse at the school. The Landcare coordinator became a parent and assisted with annual seed collection and plant propagation. Wildlife experts in contact with the Landcare group involved students in special study sessions; for example, a bat survey in 1998. The discovery of endangered squirrel gliders initially at one of the student's homes and later within the township was further inspiration for the school community.

In the bigger picture of a sustainable planet, the physical development of WEEC was a small start. From the perspective of how change happens, this collaborative, inspired, school-community restoration activity was very significant: participants began small and won! And after two years of activity that included regular water testing, plant propagation, seed collection and tree planting, *the school and community were hooked!* In addition, many of the local farming community were enthusiastic to see young people learn more about local Burrumbuttock issues such as woodland restoration practices and water quality. Their long-term interests in the land meant they were keen to see their children and others acquire positive environmental attitudes and learn more about proactive environmental practices. As a result, local landholders and local volunteers supported the idea of developing the Centre and the project acquired a school *and* community learning focus. An environmental education centre that serviced the local area and inspired greater goals of sustainability within the community grew directly from this attention to a degraded piece of land.

By the late 90s, the school had developed a reputation for innovative environmental education programs and the local office of the Department of Education and Training invited Owen to become involved in the Learnscapes pilot. This involvement inspired the vision for developing an outdoor learning area capable of supporting curriculum and engaging students more thoroughly in their own learning: local environmental and sustainability issues would come to life through hands-on learning; the school would become a site for research by the school and universities; local school relations would be strengthened through a community-run environment centre. Owen sought funds. A grant for a major design and landscaping project was the necessary catalyst to get things rolling. A number of other small grants were also received from the Curriculum Directorate, the National Heritage Trust, the West Hume Landcare Group and the local Shire Council. The Local Paper Mill formerly known as Fletcher Challenge and now Norske Skog became actively involved with project funding and in-kind support.

From there, things snowballed. Community interest grew and from amongst the local community specialist support and helping hands emerged. These included a horticulturalist, a wetland ecologist, academic experts, volunteers with engineering and practical skills and supporters with essential equipment and talents.

We didn't realise how significant the project was getting until our local Landcare group nominated the school for the NSW Landcare Education award. Burrumbuttock Public School won the 1999 State award, and then the prestigious National Landcare Award followed in 2000. Since then, the school and the WEEC have won many other awards and have been recognised widely. This acknowledgment has always been a great source of encouragement for those involved. These awards brought enormous local pride to the community, opportunities to access further funding and motivation to keep going.

Owen was invited to present at the ***Learnscapes across the Globe*** conference in Austria in 2001. BPS and the WEEC received international acclaim. Owen returned, further inspired to adapt strategies he'd seem employed through the Eco Schools model in Europe and the UK. Outdoor education, use of local environmental and advocacy experts and scaffolded learning were among these ideas.

Importantly during all of this action, Owen mapped out the learning opportunities across the curriculum; a six month secondment to full-time lecturing at a local university in 2000 assisted him greatly in developing quality lesson plans that linked to curriculum outcomes. These he shared with other schools and tertiary institutions, which had begun to visit the Centre.

After some negotiation, the DET provided support (1 day teacher release per week) to enable BPS to develop its site and attend to visiting students and teachers. Lessons for BPS and visiting students included visual arts, orienteering, bugwatch, birdwatching, water monitoring, outdoor maths with tree plantations (for example, trees were planted in mathematical patterns – an idea developed in collaboration with the local paper mill); students are still using the trees and participating in practical maths lessons today!

The project was also motivated by the need and desire to save vulnerable local flora and fauna species such as the squirrel glider, which has become an icon for WEEC. A specially-targeted project culminated in the development of a DVD about this gliding possum's threats and survival.

The school now attracts overseas visitors. Greencorps and tertiary institutions are using the site; guided tours are conducted and local environment agency staff access WEEC for professional learning. In 2005 more than 2000 students from the region visited the school. (Release time is a real limitation for Owen; the DET is looking for ways to increase support beyond the one day.)

Many other supporters have been found: Landcare Australia, Greater Hume Shire Council, Sony, Norske Skog Paper Mills and the Murray Catchment Management Authority have contributed funds to support operations at WEEC. In mid 2006, a new and modern all-weather, interpretative centre will be opened adjacent to BPS. Later in 2006, Commonwealth funds will see the installation of a water recycling system for garden irrigation. Negotiations are proceeding for the installation of solar panels to provide electricity for the building; excess will be fed back into the national grid.

The school and Centre have become a place where students, teachers and the wider community learn about practical changes they can make (e.g. selecting appropriate trees and shrubs for home and farm planting).

The Benefits

The project has brought excitement to learning by children and slowly a new culture of learning in the school has developed. Staff are also more motivated and more willing to look at alternative ways of teaching.

The school and WEEC are all encompassing. They have grown together as one. Our School Environmental Management Plan is driven all year round by our involvement in the WEEC.

There have been tangible benefits for kids outside of the quality classroom activities: many are developing excellent skills in public speaking; many are involved in guiding visitors and explaining and demonstrating aspects of the site. Teachers are enthused with a creative, cross-curriculum environmental education resource that provides rich learning for students.

Community-based conservation awareness and actions have been greatly enhanced. Other local schools have been motivated to develop their own projects linked to the WEEC. These include a shade house at Rand Public and wetlands projects at Holbrook and Culcairn Public Schools.

The school's profile has been significantly raised. Now there are regular international visitors such as Fullbright Scholars from the USA, television and radio interview opportunities and endless requests for visits. Strong links have been developed with such agencies as the Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre, the Wonga Wetlands, Riverina TAFE, Charles Sturt and Latrobe

Universities, North Albury Rotary, Murray Management Catchment Authority, the Norske Skog Paper Mill and the NSW Curriculum Directorate.

We have continued to move ahead because our partners and supporters inspire us to keep moving forward. They drive us, we drive them.

The Lessons

The lessons that have emerged from this project include:

1. Schools struggle with resources, focus and time when it comes to putting in place quality environmental education actions. This project was built on the principles of **Learnsapes** and modelled on successful projects in Scandinavia and the UK. Learning from other programs, other schools and other countries is important. Close links for learning and sharing with leading schools elsewhere are valued and maintained (e.g. Hagbourne Primary School one of the UK's top Eco Schools in England).
2. *I never planned it to be as big as it's got.* It grew on the back of solid **community support** and access to funding opportunities. It also relied upon motivated, dedicated and skilful people who gave generously of their time.
3. It's vital not to rely on one person or champion. The project has a monthly management committee (8 people) meeting and it happens regardless of who's there or not there. A key success factor has been careful consulting and **effective communication** amongst the committee and always seeking new ideas and accessing to personnel with specific skills.
4. Communities have an interest in their local areas. Find out what it is. Know your community. Typically, there is genuine community commitment to local projects; this project was able to **harness energy from a lot of sources including the experts and expertise that already existed in the community**. Every community has a pool of energy and expertise. What is needed is someone to identify, manage, nurture, and welcome the support while, at the same time, steering it in the right direction.
5. **Invite outside people and agencies** to get involved in school programs and to be an integral part of teaching/learning programs. All that happened was possible because it happened within the context of teaching and learning.
6. There are lots of small projects that schools can be involved with in their communities. **Become involved in local environmental needs**, take local actions where students can use their hands to connect with nature. Create opportunities in class and school for students to learn to appreciate their local area and to *regularly* take on local issues. Facilitate deep involvement. Inspire the students.
7. **Capture opportunities** along the way. Document the changes and involvement in community initiatives. These records will have countless uses (e.g. awards, funds).
8. Value and recognise the **contributions of supporters and volunteers**, and have regular celebrations of milestones achieved.

Finally, the advice from BPS is that *other schools can develop key elements of our project. Our project or the processes we used can't be duplicated entirely, but there's no single element in our project that couldn't be done in other schools. This project grew because of the passion of this school community to motivate other communities. The challenge is to realise the potential!*

Contact information

School: www.burrumbutt-p.schools.nsw.edu.au

WEEC website: www.wirraminna.org online in August 2006.

A dvd of the project is available to order from this website.

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