



Sustainable Schools Program 2002-2004

The Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW) and the Department of Education and Training

CASE STUDY

Project Description

The NSW Department of Education and Training's Environmental Education Policy for Schools (2001) makes it compulsory for government schools to develop School Environmental Management Plans (SEMPs). This means that each school is required to prepare, implement and review a SEMP across three focus areas: management of resources, management of school grounds and curriculum integration.

The Sustainable Schools Program in 2002-2004 (SSP) facilitated the development, implementation and review of Environmental Management Plans by schools in NSW in order to encourage and support a shift by schools towards sustainable practices.

The SSP has been developed and is managed jointly by a partnership between the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC); it attempted to build a framework and a set of processes that with further funding from the Department of Environment and Heritage, enabled other state government agencies to work cooperatively to support environmental education in all schools, including non-government schools. The framework also tried to make it easier for other organisations to help schools incorporate sustainability messages and practices into teaching and learning as well as the management of facilities, grounds and resources.



Importantly, the SSP builds on the valuable work done during the past decade by many organisations, including local councils, non-government organisations and the Environmental Education Centres and schools themselves; it supported the evolution of thinking and practice towards sustainability; and it sought to establish or strengthen the focus on sustainability in school-community partnerships.

Now, after the pilot phase, the design of the future shape of the SSP is underway. From 2005, the program will take on a more regional structure – this will mirror the new regional structures within the DET and also existing structures in the non-government sectors.



Australian Government

Department of the Environment and Heritage

NEW SOUTH WALES
DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION
AND TRAINING



Department of
Environment and
Conservation (NSW)

During its pilot phase (May 2003– December 2004, the NSW SSP worked as follows:

1. Local teams of environment educators were established across NSW. This Support Team was trained in how to support the SEMP process in schools. Training included auditing, visioning processes, planning, monitoring, evaluation and using the SSP database. Each member of the Support Team worked with up to 10 schools, assisting their understanding of current practices and environmental performance, and in planning and developing SEMP and/or integrating existing actions into a SEMP. The emphasis was on starting where schools were at and on providing ideas, guidance and training to help them shift towards a vision of their school as a sustainable school and towards a more coordinated approach to environmental education.
2. The Support Team also began to develop state-wide and local/regional support networks of government agencies (local and state) and non-government organisations capable of providing further assistance to local schools.
3. As the schools planned and took action, the Support Team helped them to further develop their SEMP and to integrate environmental management into other school policy approaches to a newly developed database.

The program has a number of key features.

The SSP:

- is systems-based in nature
- values the role of people working as individuals and in teams (Support Team, teachers, students, agencies)
- promotes inter-agency cooperation
- supports action learning as its preferred learning style
- is founded on strategic thinking and planning
- emphasises school- community relationships
- rewards achievement
- strengthens connection-building strategies in school, across curriculum, into community
- provides support on-line.



These are endorsed by DET and DEC because they highlight a clear, integrated framework that schools can put into action.

Project rationale

Although the quality of environmental education in some NSW schools over the past 15 years has been exemplary, when viewed across the state, it has been patchy and ad hoc. The 1989 NSW Environmental Education Curriculum Statement mandated the integration of environmental education into the curriculum. This had limited success. The 2001 NSW EEP went several steps further and mandated actions and the integration of sustainability learning. This policy recognizes the place of teaching and learning within a school and within a school system. It requires sustainability decisions and actions in whole school management as well as in the classroom. Both DET and DEC have understood the need for coordinated support if this policy is to be successful. Based on previous experience, local research and on international trials, the understanding is that the support needs to be predominantly people-oriented rather than kit-based.

The NSW Sustainable Schools Program is designed specifically to support the EEP and to encourage all schools, including non government schools, to become more sustainable.

The Australian Department of Environment and Heritage has supported the program as a part

Project stakeholders

- Staff and students of the 188 participating SSP schools
- Staff and students of all schools in NSW who are not involved in the SSP (including non-government schools)
- Environmental Education Centres (DET)
- DET staff in state/regional offices
- School administration staff
- Senior staff from the DET and the DEC
- Local government staff
- Non-government organisations and commercial education providers with an interest in school environmental education.

Project targets

The pilot phase of the program is working with almost 188 schools (government and non government, secondary and primary) around NSW. Tools, approaches, lessons, advice will be gathered and made available to all NSW schools (approx 3,300) on this website.

From 2005 it is likely that the mainstreaming of the program will be via regions.

Project methods

The SSP has taken a systems approach in its development and implementation. This means that students and teachers haven't been singled out and targeted. Instead, the SSP brings an understanding that teachers and students operate within a broader context; schools themselves operate within systems and broader contexts. Actions at one level of the system (e.g. cleaning contracts) impact on actions, practices, opportunities and learning at other levels. Based on this principle, the SSP has worked closely with teachers, students, other government agencies, local councils and a range of non-government organisations.

It has also worked with a number of units within the DET and different parts of the school community. For example, through their purchasing practices, the Administration Support Staff at schools can play an important role in helping schools become more sustainable. With this in mind, a workshop and

training materials were developed in close contact with appropriate DET and DEC officers. This has been piloted around NSW and it has been integrated into the professional learning package for SASS so that it is now available to around 6000 administration staff as standard practice for School Administration Support Staff.

The SSP has helped schools build links with other organisations; the networking amongst schools has enabled them to create their own local support systems.

Each school has approached the SEMP process from a different angle and with different strengths. Although these various capacities and interests have resulted in a diversity of approaches and actions, each has undertaken a range of similar activities, including:

1. Reviewing current practices by

- desktops reviews of bills associated with utilities
- walk through audits and surveys of utility usage around the school
- surveys of the school grounds
- organisational reviews that map the key activities and people within the school

2. Actions associated with future planning and actions, including:

- development of visions with the school community
- increasing effectiveness of their current systems (e.g. paper recycling)
- implementation of processes to address other



areas of environmental action (e.g. energy management)

3. Actions to do with teaching and learning processes, such as:

- teacher development of new units of work
- student participation in decision making processes
- surveys of the curriculum.

4. Actions to do with building and acknowledging community support, such as:

- school links with their local environment groups
- links with the local community to work on joint projects
- links with local government and state government agencies.

5. Actions to do with evaluating progress, including:

- deliberative reflection on school processes and approaches to teaching
- reflection and reporting through the website (and with teacher release time for the key teachers in each school) on progress and planning.

Project resources

The SSP has operated on the belief that there are already many good resources to support environmental education in schools. Given this, the major thrust of the program has been to put people – human resources – into the schools and communities.

A small number of resources have been developed:

- Training package for SASS
- Support team manual
- Website developed and in use
- Database as a tool for building a SEMP and for reflecting on processes and progress.

How the project was evaluated

Phase 1 is currently being evaluated. Early in the life of the program, professional evaluators helped develop an evaluation tool and a schedule for evaluation. The SSP is being evaluated as it goes along, capturing changes to practices in schools and informing the

evolution of the program. A summative report of the SSP, including the evaluation will be available early in 2006.

An interim report (December 2003) revealed that participating schools:

- welcomed the face-to-face support afforded by the Support team (ST)
- welcomed advice and support to develop more coordinated approaches to environmental education
- valued being acknowledged for what they have already done
- valued recognition they received from their local communities
- are developing SEMP's (though more slowly than anticipated)
- needed support to develop visions and broadly constituted School Environment Committees.

An interim report on the 11 case study schools for the evaluation revealed some interesting findings. Schools commented on:

- the usefulness of the SSP in providing a thematic framework for thinking about, prioritising and organising a range of environmental activities that have been undertaken by schools in the past in a largely ad hoc and uncoordinated manner
- the Support Team as providers of moral and collegial support for in-school enthusiasts including strategies for overcoming curriculum integration, mediating between school coordinator and Principal or other Executive to overcome barriers, providing specific professional development days for drafting SEMP or purchasing policies
- the value of the ST in providing practical advice about actions such as audits and no waste lunches and in helping to bring into the discussion a wider range of people in the school community (e.g. getting different departments involved and talking to each other, getting administration staff involved) and broadening the school effort beyond a single individual.

Environmental outcomes

Significant environmental outcomes are occurring at the local level. Schools have undertaken a range of activities in energy, waste

and water reduction as well as increased the purchase of recycled content materials. Grounds improvements continue. But the figures available now are primarily benchmarks resulting from audits and reviews of energy and water bills. Significantly, these audits are enabling schools to plan five-year SEMP's rather than one-year plans. The audit knowledge is allowing them to be more strategic and to think into the longer term.



Project outcomes

The project has resulted in many new actions within schools and the school system.

These include:

- 188 schools directly engaged in the pilot program. 40 of these have been recognised as outstanding sustainable schools within their region
- 194 SEMP's have been developed
- 69 local councils have been involved in supporting their local, participating schools; this support has also extended to schools not in the SSP
- 32 trained environmental educators operating around the state as a part of the Support Team. Most of these were working from the DET's Environmental Education Centres, which are the hub for supporting the uptake of the EEP with 2 working from local council
- increased awareness about the DET's *Implementing Environmental Education in Your School, a support tool for the EEP*
- 39 school purchasing staff attended a series of networking and information sessions on environmentally friendly purchasing; these were run in Sydney and northern NSW. This is now being implemented as a training program across NSW
- a workshop with representative students and organisations working on water and energy reduction programs to support the State Student Representative Council to implement its resolution on water and energy efficiencies measures
- support for various youth conferences around the state through active participation (e.g.



the Agricultural conference in Albury and the Environmental Youth Forum in Lismore in partnership with North East Waste Forum and Dorrroughby EEC)

- research into success factors in school-community sustainability relationships conducted by the University of Technology Sydney and partnerships across state government agencies
- statewide media coverage of the SSP
- helped build a critical mass of teachers and others within participating schools; these include cross-curriculum and cross- faculty links as well as staff in other functional areas of the schools
- developed monitoring mechanisms through the website to track environmental data across all schools
- facilitated state-wide government agency involvement
- promoted closer school-community relationships for sustainability
- conducted workshops for teachers, parents and other identified community representatives
- recognised outstanding schools and practices and regional achievements through a 2-day professional development and skill-building event

- received sponsorship from Holden for awards
- worked to support Student Representative Council in schools and through state mechanisms
- shared lessons and influenced the direction of the national Sustainable Schools Initiative and the work in other states and territories
- This website will be available.

How will the outcomes/learning be maintained/reinforced?

In 2005 the program will be designed to reflect the changing structures of the DET and to incorporate the growing interest at local and regional levels in participating in this initiative.

For more information

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