

# Sustaining priorities

Schools, rather than federal and state education departments, are driving environmental education initiatives, according to a respected academic.

by **Cynthia Karena**

**E**nvironmental education is a political priority, but not an educational priority, says Professor Annette Gough. “Until it becomes an educational priority, it will sit on the fringes,” says the pioneer in Australian environmental education who now heads the School of Education at RMIT University, in Melbourne.

While many schools have been “doing wonderful things in environmental education for a long time”, says Gough, education departments are not treating it as a priority and including it in the curriculum.

She says the national environmental education documents don’t have as much impact because they’re issued by the environment department rather than the education department.

There is “token acknowledgement” of sustainability in the Melbourne Goals – the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which the state, territory and federal education ministers released in 2008 – and in curriculum documents,



**Sketching in the outdoor classroom**

under civics and citizenship teaching, says Gough.

“[But] the information is not being filtered down to schools. What happens in schools is totally due to the enthusiasm of the teachers, students and communities,” she says.

Fortunately, there is considerable enthusiasm.

At Lenah Valley Primary School, in Tasmania, sustainability co-ordinator Jenny Dudgeon has been using the 2005 document *Educating for a Sustainable Future: a National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools* in discussions with other staff about what sustainability means. Such

statements can guide priority setting for including sustainability across the curriculum, she says.

“From a planning point of view, [the 2005 statement] is a great starting point for teachers to develop ideas on what to do in the classroom. It has inspired high school teachers in particular. It helps them flesh out sustainability in the curriculum.”

Teacher Learning Network executive officer Michael Victory says statements such as *Living Sustainably: the Australian Government’s National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability (2009)* give environmental education legitimacy and give licence to incorporating environmental initiatives into teaching.

# Environment

(right) Kindergarteners from Lenah Valley Primary School enjoy morning tea in the outdoor classroom.

(below left) Cleaning up the outdoor classroom

(below right) Senior students take a litter audit

“In schools where environmental education is seen as soft or irrelevant, teachers can use a broader national framework to argue for their sustainability programs to be included in the curriculum,” he says. “A national framework can also drive policy decisions at a higher level – for example, building green schools.”

At Ballajura Community College, in Perth, sustainability is built into the curriculum from years 1 to 10, says Graeme Repper, head of the society and environment department.

“In politics, year 10 students study the High Court’s Mabo decision and how Aboriginal people looked after their environment in the past,” says Repper. “In history, the students look at the Americans’ use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War and its effect on the environment.”

Year 11 geography includes using resources sustainably and minimising the impact of climate change. In year 12, 50 per cent of the geography course is a climate change unit. It includes concepts such as sustainability, climate and solar cycles, and El Niño and La Niña. The other 50 per cent is urban studies, with the overriding theme being the sustainability of cities.

“Current affairs are always discussed in society and environment classes, and environmental issues have been a major feature of lessons,” says Repper.

“Practical solutions to environmental challenges are incorporated into the lessons. For example, students discuss the length of their showers, how to use electricity efficiently – overall, how to improve environmental sustainability in their own lives.”

Repper notes that environmental sustainability is an important factor in the new national curriculum. It’s a cross-curricular priority in the four subjects developed so far: English, mathematics, science and history.



Lenah Valley Primary has a K-6 school agreement to conduct scientific inquiries into sustainability issues relating to energy. It’s embedded not only into science, but also into information and communications technology, English, maths, history, health and wellbeing, and civics and citizenship.

At Berwick Fields Primary School, in Melbourne, environmental programs make it easy for students to explore concepts such as measurement, reading, estimation and biodiversity across the curriculum, says principal Stephen Wigney.

Students have been involved in designing and developing a Stephanie Alexander kitchen garden. The school is also participating in the Eco-Cubby project run by the City of Melbourne and Regional Arts Victoria. Two architects worked with students on a cubby design



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**Professor Annette Gough**  
Head, School of Education, RMIT



Senior students use 'Eucaflips' to identify eucalypt species

energy, water and transport usage surveys, replanting programs, building nesting boxes or establishing Stephanie Alexander gardens.

Even though students may recognise threats to the environment, they need encouragement to act. Combining information and knowledge with immersion in activities changes people's behaviour. "Theory doesn't lead to action. Practice does," says Gough.

When AuSSI Tasmania arranged an independent evaluation of its activities for 2009-10, students gave wide-ranging examples of the changes they had observed in themselves, other students, teachers, parents and the school environment. The changes were across all categories of resources – water, waste, energy and biodiversity – and included kitchen/vegetable gardens and general sustainability issues.

At Lenah Valley Primary, many students said their involvement in the school's sustainability program had made them feel more confident and willing to take on responsibilities. |

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which encompassed sustainable housing, recycling materials and reducing water use. The school will build the cubbies this year.

## Finding a framework

Gough says the number one thing schools should do is join the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) so they have a framework for environmental education in areas such as water, energy, waste and biodiversity. (State-based programs also exist such as the Victorian government's ResourceSmart program.)

Dudgeon, who is AuSSI's Tasmanian co-ordinator, says its program combines social action with the curriculum.

"AuSSI provides opportunities to collaborate with other schools in the creation of an environmental management plan," she says. "It supports

schools with professional learning, planning assistance and a national network."

Each AuSSI school is asked to conduct a waste audit and develop an environmental management plan outlining its specific issues. They are also encouraged to get involved in their community to promote a culture of sustainability.

"One example was when students became concerned about litter affecting native species habitats in nearby bushland," she says. "When they created pamphlets and letterboxed the neighbourhood to raise community awareness, they got a positive response."

Such community outreach activities are an important part of environmental education, says Gough. They can also take the form of biodiversity projects,



## Resources

- n [www.environment.gov.au](http://www.environment.gov.au)
- n *How to Succeed with Education for Sustainability*, by Josephine Lang (Curriculum Corporation, 2007)
- n *Recent Trends in Environmental Education in Australia*, by Annette Gough (RMIT University, 2009)