School-Community Learning Partnerships for Sustainability Stories

Introduction

This research documented five case stories of schools involved in successful School-Community Learning Partnerships for Sustainability experiences based on existing programs such as Planet Savers, Solar in Schools and ResourceSmart /AuSSI Schools. Through these case stories, the research wanted to identify key factors that contributed to the development and sustaining of the school-community partnerships in terms of the following: the nature of partnerships, the types of issues tackled, and the roles and processes involved in the formation and sustaining of partnerships. Furthermore, the research wanted to explore the development of a combined Case Writing and Most Significant Change process in the documentation and analysis of the Case Stories.

This research builds on previous studies conducted on education and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the Western Port region of Victoria in 2005. The initial study developed a “Continuum of Education Strategies” that argued that education can be seen as a continuum that started and progressed from (a) information dissemination, to (b) communication and dialogue, to (c) individual learning and action, and finally to (d) community capacity building.

This Continuum framework was valuable for a second study that evaluated the current level of community engagement that exists within schools in the Western Port area that are involved in the Planet Savers (PS) program. The aim of the PS program is to help schools reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions towards carbon neutrality through three areas: (1) school operations, (2) curriculum development and (3) community engagement. This second study, completed in 2006, concluded that Planet Savers schools achieved significant reduction of their GHG emissions which have resulted in savings within the school. Most of these were achieved through changes in the first two areas: changes in operations within the school and innovations within the existing curriculum.

However, the third area of community engagement was evaluated to be primarily passive, or at the first level of the Continuum where the emphasis is on the communication of information from the school to the community rather than a more active engagement of the school with the community. It is this area of school-community engagement through ‘learning partnerships’ that this project investigated based on the contention that improved partnerships are important in shifting schools and communities towards achieving the goals of education for sustainable development.
Methods

The following groups (Western Port Greenhouse Alliance, CERES and Sustainability Victoria) were asked to identify schools that were considered to be ‘star’ schools based on their participation and achievements as part of the Planet Savers Program and Solar in Schools Program. The recommended schools were approached and all of them agreed to be interviewed. After each interview, a case story was written up by the interviewer and returned to them for validation. The focus of the interviews was to describe and reflect on the school-community partnership experience. The following schools agreed to participate: Bentleigh Secondary College, Woodleigh School, Tooradin Primary School, and Carrum Downs Secondary College. In addition, Sustainable Strathfieldsaye was included based on the recommendation of SV as an example of a more local community initiative that has successfully worked with schools.

After the case stories were validated and in some cases revised, each of the interviewees was asked to identify the most significant aspect of their story as it related to the notion of school-community partnerships for sustainability. These stories are printed in this booklet.

All of the interviewees were then invited to a story sharing session at Bentleigh Secondary College where each of the stories they selected were shared. Of the five participating schools, three attended the story sharing session.

Key Observations

At the conclusion of the story sharing session, the following themes based on the case stories of school-community partnerships for sustainability and the case story writing process were identified:

Nature of the Partnership as a Continuum

> The nature of the school-community partnerships can be described within a continuum involving the following: LINKING- NETWORKING – COOPERATION – PARTNERSHIP.
> Each of the case stories were at different positions along the continuum based on the nature and stage of specific projects, rather than on more long-term sustained partnerships across issues and themes.
> Integrating and linking specific projects and their outcomes into the wider activities of the school and its community seemed to be more straightforward for the primary school interviewed than for secondary schools included in the project.
Issues tackled: From Single-Issues to Inter-related Issues

> All of the case stories began with a single issue, but with time developed by linking up with other issues. For example, the staff at Tooradin emphasised how establishing links between a healthy eating program and the Planet Savers Program was crucial in embedding sustainability practices in the school.

> The links between projects and issues were made at the school level and were cumulative in developing a culture and vision for the school which was then portrayed to the community (or used to redefine the relationship of the school to the community). Therefore, for the schools that participated in this research, the interrelated issues encouraged the reaching out to the community. However in Strathfieldsaye it was the other way round. The connections from one project or issue to the next are made by one of the partners rather than being co-constructed as the result of partnership activity.

Who is the ‘community’?

> Community links described were not limited to the immediate geographical community. For example at Woodleigh, the immediate community was described as ‘distant’ in terms of relating to the school, while there is a sustained ‘closer’ partnership with a community of alumni and parents (some of them actually being overseas) who continue to be engaged with sustainability projects in the school. Similarly, at Carrum Downs, the most significant story was about the partnership with the Melbourne Royal Botanic Garden based on the opportunity it provided the students to engage with environmental sustainability practices around gardens and how this translated to changing attitudes about the environment in the school and in the homes of the student who were involved.

> It can be observed that the roles of the key players were transformed over time. This was exhibited by the Woodleigh case story of the students then becoming alumni and therefore transforming their roles and the nature of their contribution to the project. Similarly, the students becoming parents and grandparents at Tooradin were also identified.

> The ‘community’ tended to be ‘defined’ by the school in terms of connections that work specifically around responding to environmental sustainability issues.

> Parents continue to be seen as the first point of contact in order to reach out to the community and the approach most often identified has been that of information dissemination through the newsletter.

> The status of school-community partnerships in the five case stories is as much reflective of the ‘lack’ of social links or social capital in many of Australian communities.
Initiating and Sustaining the Partnership

> Initiation of the links has come from any of the key stakeholders (e.g. Woodleigh – student initiated; Strathfieldsaye – it was more the community that initiated the links; Carrum Downs – it was the teacher that initiated the links to the RBG).
> The key role of outside bodies (e.g. Planet Savers, SV Solar in Schools, CERES, VAEE, etc) in facilitating these links and processes for schools was identified.
> However, it was identified that sustaining the project and the link to the community is very much dependent on having both a ‘champion teacher’ and a very supportive administration, often the principal.
> Even the most compelling of projects required significant and sustained input from at least one committed teacher prepared to make an extra effort. However, in the case of Strathfieldsaye, the ‘champion’ was both a local community member (a parent) but also a teacher and the area facilitator for Sustainable Schools.
> Even with such committed teachers, developing beyond projects to create a more enduring and sustainable school/community culture requires commitment at school’s management level.

Case Story Writing: Reflections on Process

> The process of story telling and writing was identified by the interviewees as a good opportunity for reflection and acknowledgement of achievements.
> While it was planned that the interviewees select a Most Significant Change story between those who were present, it was the first opportunity for the participants to actually meet each other and therefore much of the time was spent on introductions and sharing the stories and developing links between these schools.
> As such the half day process of story sharing was sufficient to share their stories and take away ways/ideas for increasing the significance of their own story in their respective schools and communities.

Table of Stories from Participating School Communities

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Engaging with Solar in Schools – becoming the ‘launch’ school
By Bill Thomas, Head, Sustainable Practices, Bentleigh Secondary College (Interviewed by Jeff King)

The most significant thing that has occurred to date is getting the key stakeholders on board. A lot of projects live and die with the person doing them and if they move on then the project is going to fade away. Anything that is put in place needs to become almost institutionalised so that it will continue on beyond the person that initiated it.

This has occurred at Bentleigh. Sustainability is a cornerstone of the direction that the school is taking. It has become formalised within the school's strategic plan during the last year. The (future) pathway is pretty well defined. Sustainability as a direction and a priority for the school won’t disappear with personalities. The strategic direction is something that the principal talks to on numerous occasions – many, many times a year. As do I, to larger groups. The job I am doing now exists permanently as a leading teacher two position within the school structure. It would be advertised state-wide if I fell off the perch, but it has become part of the existing school to the extent that the boss would probably lean on someone that he knew had a few skills in the area should I no longer fill the role.

Sustainability has therefore become mainstream, and there is a sense that it will endure. We have an Assistant Principal’s job advertised at the moment and it is mentioned in that. It is expected that any person joining the staff at BSC actively support the College direction. This is what the school is on about and if you apply for this job this is what we expect. Effective cultural change affects whole school reform but leadership is lynchpin stuff.

Whole School Reform
There is not a particular story here, but more an incremental process that is gathering momentum. Several projects that have been started or planned are as yet not yet fully operating. The school is in the middle of a significant building program that has been very divisive on the functioning of the school. The scale of the development is in excess of $6,000,000.00. As you can imagine this has been a stressful and frustrating time and very difficult for the normal activities of a school to take place with the usual degree of efficiency. When the building program is finished (September/October 2008) a lot of these frustrations will disappear very quickly, and the effects of our other initiatives will be more strongly felt.
I believe that sustainability is more than just about “hardware” such as solar panels and water tanks and all that sort of stuff. I believe it is much more than this. It includes sustainability of culture, sustainability of language, sustainability of self, sustainability of staff, the sustainability of a whole bunch of things. The more projects that develop links all over the place and the more that those projects are handed off to others to manage and develop ownership of, the wider the reach and the greater the impact of sustainable practices taken up by individuals that are exemplified by the projects will be. The things that we are doing here (sustainability) need to, and will connect to all aspects of school life. I believe they will improve our VCE results as well. Kids that are connected to the College and feel good and positive about the place are going to do better. When the whole school takes these things on board and everything is interconnected then things can’t help but spiral up.

Taking Sustainability Seriously at Woodleigh School
By Gary Simpson (interviewed by Ron Toomey and Julie Harris)

Woodleigh School has a strong commitment to the environment, actively promoting environmental awareness in the student body and throughout the wider community via a number of programs and initiatives including, for example, volunteer programs with a number of local reserves and a formal recycling initiative throughout the school.

"Respect for Environment" is one of the school’s core values. Students participate in regular “clean up” days, particularly along the Mornington Peninsula’s wonderful coastline as well as tree planting events.

Within the school grounds students, parents and community groups provide significant assistance to maintain an Australian native landscape and every effort is made by the School to integrate campus buildings in a harmonious fashion. The Senior Campus, in particular, situated on approximately 20 hectares and protected from future development in the area by a wide border of preserved land, has earned a "Land for Wildlife" classification from the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

The School takes this rating very seriously, as it does its five-star rating for energy efficiency, and these ratings are actively monitored and maintained by staff and student activity groups. From the moment you enter either campus you can quite simply tell how strong the School’s commitment to the environment is - it is part of the school philosophy.
Until relatively recently the matters of sustainability, energy conservation, renewable energy and the like were largely taken for granted at the school. In 2006, however, a senior student presented the Principal with a damming report on the school’s energy practices which had arisen from his VCE project work. Because so many members of the staff, and especially the principal, were committed to energy efficiency practices not only were they horrified by the report but they were also immediately galvanised to rectify the situation, testimony to how the school takes its students’ “voice” seriously. The school was soon focussed on the question - How do we get the school community to take sustainability seriously? A range of strategic decisions coupled with some serendipity has now turned the tide.

By Embedding it in the Curriculum
Sustainability has been formally embedded into the curriculum at Woodleigh. For instance, in term 1 2006, Year 8s at the school spent some time considering the environment. As the school was considering how to implement the changes required by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, teachers recognised an opportunity to explore ways of incorporating the Personal Learning and Thinking strands of VELs into the Science Curriculum. The science staff set the students the challenge of preparing a sustainable management plan for the school. As a former environmental planner and manager where sustainable management plans were bread and butter, the Head of Science, Dr Gary Simpson was on familiar ground.

By Embedding it into the Homestead Program
A key feature of the organisational structure at Woodleigh is the Homestead program. At Woodleigh, the word ‘Homestead’ has three special meanings. First, it denotes the seven small communities of students and teachers that are clustered together for the whole year. Second, a homestead comprises a set of buildings and gardens for each of the communities of sixty five students. They use these buildings and their surrounds as ‘home’. They use them in free time and must maintain and clean them. Third, there are regular homestead sessions once a week in the students’ weekly timetable. Junior Homesteads have a set of themes which they work on during these timetabled sessions. Increasingly, the matter of sustainability is shaping the form and content of the homestead themes. Importantly, because the homestead thematic activities regularly place such store on nurturing student agency they encourage students to actively engage sustainable practice.

By Modelling Sustainable Practices
The school consciously models sustainable practices. A conscious decision was made in the recent past to replant the school gardens exclusively with native vegetation peculiar to the Mornington Peninsula. All rooms are energy efficient. Lighting for the front and back of each room is isolated that only half the room need be lit for small group tuition. Water efficiencies are used throughout the school. There is a large school garden and animal compound which the students tend on a rostered basis.
By Doing Community Service

There are many opportunities for community involvement and service available to students at Woodleigh including the care and protection of wildlife such as dolphins and penguins and assistance with the cleaning of local beaches. Woodleigh is a socially aware community where skills of cooperative living, sustainable practices and social responsibility are fostered through its service learning program.

Conclusion

Woodleigh School actively walks the talk of sustainability. From the moment one enters the school’s grounds its commitment to sustainability is evident in the school design and general ambience. Its curriculum pays formal attention to the notion of sustainability through real world learning projects designed not only to teach the essence of sustainable practice but also to provide opportunities to apply such practices. By modelling sustainable practice the school constantly reinforces the importance of sustainability for students, parents and teachers alike.

Most Significant Change: Cultural Change within the School

By Kristie Young, Tooradin Primary School (interviewed by Robbie Guevara and Jeff King)

The Planet Savers Program has enhanced the many other environmental programs that were already in place. It has also provided links between other programs such as the “Kids-Go for your Life” program, providing a strong link between healthy living and sustainability.

The most significant change that has occurred has been the cultural change within the school. This has resulted in the staff, students and school community becoming more aware of the importance of self-monitoring and conserving. The resulting whole staff ethos change and very positive attitude is due to the sense of pride felt from the school becoming a Kids, Go For Your Life Award School and an accredited Planet Saver School (AuSSI) in only a 12 months time frame, in stead of the designated 3 yrs. Staff are continually involved in Professional Development sessions such as the Water Live It! Learn It! Program and Carbon Sink Schools.

In many ways the children have been the driving force behind the changes occurring in the school. This is because they feel ownership over the activities that they take part in and delight in the recognition. There are energy, waste and water monitors (photo above) in every classroom who are responsible for ensuring that lights, computers and taps are turned off.
The grade 5/6 students are also responsible for emptying the recycling bins and are also a driving force behind the recycling program, ensuring that children are sorting their rubbish correctly. The Environmental Club also meets twice weekly and takes part in activities such as planting, weeding and tending to the vegetable garden.

From 4 to 5 years ago, there is a gradual spread of the positive news to the parents. The newsletter has been the biggest way of communicating with the parents and the local community. In addition we also use the local newspaper and the regional newspaper (The Coastal Newsletter). The school council supports and encourages a self sufficient school, with measures in place that strive to achieve positive change in the school. The school council have also supported the implementation of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program.

Programs running in the school are continually supported by the community. The City of Casey have provided a lot of assistance as well as local nurseries and Bunnings as well as other businesses that the school deals with outside of the immediate community, such as the school uniform company.

In the future we plan to continue monitoring our energy and water saving progress through SETS. The next stage is for us to become a Solar School. We also are preparing to become a Carbon Sink School through the help of the Planet Savers Program. With the availability of funds, the school will be going ahead with wind turbines, solar panels and the Atlantis system of underground water crate storage. Parent forums have also shown an overwhelming support and it is clear that parents like to see more environmental and sustainable practices in place.

Most Significant Change – students’ attitude and involvement
By Heidi Gaffeney-Evans, Carrum Downs Secondary College
(interviewed by Robbie Guevara and Jeff King)

For me personally I think that the most significant change has been seen through the VCAL (Victoria Certificate of Applied Learning) group, where the college has managed to make links to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Melbourne. The students have been going to the city once a week for the past 3 months and doing some maintenance work and planting. They are the first group ever that have been allowed to plant trees in the Botanical Gardens too.

The staff there trusts us enough to do these things in their precious grounds. It was difficult to establish this connection and many schools throughout Melbourne have tried to make this connection. So that has been wonderful for us as a new school to have this well known contact.
Katrina King the VCAL coordinator has been instrumental as she goes with the group on most of their visits. I have been with them to see what some of the students were doing and how they approach the environment. Also part of this program was seeing the students come to appreciate some of the environmental benefits of growing your own vegetables. It was interesting because this group of students are not what you would consider as a horticultural group. They are not normally into these sorts of activities at all. At first they were questioning – What am I doing here! Then they could see some of the benefits of what they were doing and it was great.

The students have brought back what they have done, to the school and presented not only what they were doing, but why it is important too. Some of the students have started veggie gardens at home and we are putting one in at school. I am going to help them with the design of this, so they can incorporate some other features into their garden.

We are going to invite the staff from the Botanical Gardens to our college for a luncheon and to ask them how they thought we went and what we can do further.

It is an important model to get up and running; so that we can say we have experience with the wider community. Our aim for the future is to take this good experience as a model to make other links with more community groups. We can use this experience as a reference point and the Botanical Gardens staff as referees.

(Photo provided by Heidi Gaffney-Evans)

Sustainable Strathfieldsaye - Schools as Community Hub
By Paul Dullard, Sustainable Strathfieldsaye and AuSSi-Vic Facilitator
(Interviewed by Robbie Guevara)

It began with St Francis of the Fields (SFF) becoming a Sustainable School eight years ago, and then Strathfieldsaye Primary School (SPS) started doing the same 5 or 6 years, and SDCE has been going for 4 years now. It all started with the focus on raising money to build a community facility. Then we raised money to build a bike path. And then everyone started thinking the bike path was about health and sustainability. And then we started looking at revegetation and put that sustainable slant in there. Not everyone in the SDCE Board is the Sustainable Strathfieldsaye sub-committee, but there is an element within the district about coming together as a reference group about sustainability. The fact that there is a representative on the Board from schools - plus the linkages with professional people such as electricians, fitters, businessmen and women - the group is coming together and learning from what the schools are doing, but also the SDCE will include the schools with the other things they come up.

The 100 rooftops is a simple plan. But the goal posts have been moved by the change in the government policy. This may reduce the uptake of the solar panels on domestic rooftops, because we live in an area where many families may be over the threshold.
So that has placed restraints to these 100 rooftops, but the scheme will go ahead. The community energy park was a long term plan, however, part of the subcommittee are constantly working on the plan.

Solar in schools is the most immediate thing that we can do within the community, while it has been put in hold until July, but it will take off in July. Put up solar panels in schools, the curriculum developed and the whole plan of how we will use it by the end of this year.

**Significant change**

Our biggest aim was to get the solar panels on the roofs to start the story. The visual was going to be our strongest outcome – the physical presence of panels. The Council is committed to the panels already on the community building. We are talking about probabilities more and more everyday, not just possibilities, but it is not a reality yet.

We are probably down the track a lot further compared to other communities with regards to having a group that talks about sustainability for their district and also way down the track about having schools that we don’t have them to become aware – they are aware. The beautiful thing about our schools is that they are informed about sustainability, they are aware that you need to set up strong plans and frameworks to have success. They are about innovative change. The influence they have in the community is that people talk about Strathfieldsaye particularly about having those two strong leading schools. What our aim is for people to come into Strathfieldsaye and know that this is a community that is strong in Principle, Practice and Policy in regards to sustainability.

You don’t have many communities that are like that. You go down into the Mornington Peninsula now and through the schools you will know that there is strong commitment. Their challenge is like our challenge is to say when you drive into Mornington that the Council is behind all these.
Acknowledgements

This research was conducted by: Jose Roberto Guevara, Jeff King, Julie Harris and Prof. Ron Toomey, with funding from the RMIT Emerging Researcher Grants and the Solar in Schools Program of Sustainability Victoria. We wish to thank the teachers and principals who provided us with the time to share their experiences of school community partnerships for sustainability. Thank you to Bentleigh Secondary College for hosting the story sharing session and to Greg Hunt from WPGA and Eric Bottomley from CERES for assisting us with identifying the schools involved in this project. May the stories and the learning partnerships that have developed continue to grow.

October 2008 version (draft not for further citation)