

Increasing the role for schools in contributing to a sustainable society

John Rhymer

John is Head of the Bishops Wood Centre - 'educating for a sustainable future'. He is teacher adviser with Worcestershire LEA with responsibility for Education for Sustainable Development.

Schools are becoming more sustainable. The growing acceptance of initiatives such as Eco-Schools combined with a growing awareness of, and concern for, environmental issues amongst school staff and particularly amongst pupils is driving this forward. Citizenship is now part of the national curriculum.

Global events over the past few years, ranging from 9/11 to the terrible tsunami in South East Asia, combined with the immediacy of our electronic media have brought a new urgency to our understanding of our place on an ever-shrinking globe. Global citizenship and the global dimension are no longer just words in the national curriculum. They are an essential part of learning for both young and old.

How can schools play a more active role in helping their local communities become more sustainable? We know that the enthusiasm and concern that many young people have for the environment and for others can influence their families. A study by CREATE revealed that when children learnt about energy saving at school, this had a greater effect on energy saving in the home than did energy saving programmes targeting households. This was not because children were the only ones wasting energy in the home but because their informed concern and willingness to take action influenced other members of the household. This impact was confirmed by a pilot study in Worcestershire where 50 schools took part in a composting project. Though no materials were provided to explicitly encourage composting at home, this was indeed one of the effects of the project. There were very significant increases not only in home composting but also in other recycling activity, which parents attributed to the children's involvement at school.

Schools are starting to look outwards - into their local communities. The Eco-Schools programme actively encourages community awareness raising. The community is increasingly being seen as an essential resource for learning. Learning in the real world helps to balance the increasing time that students are spending in the virtual world of computers. Libraries, museums, green spaces and work places all provide learning opportunities that suit a wider range of learning styles than can readily be accommodated in the classroom. An increasingly diverse curriculum for students aged 14-19, with more emphasis on work-related and personalised learning, is encouraging schools to look to the community.

As schools look increasingly outwards they become more receptive to welcoming the community into their schools. The fortress mentality, an understandable consequence of the Dunblane tragedy, is changing. In part this is because schools are increasingly held accountable to the local community. Schools and school designers are becoming more experienced in managing visitors and dual use of their premises, without compromising the safety of the children. Funding often depends on community use of computer suites, performance studios, sports halls and pitches and assembly halls. This represents a more sustainable use of the building stock and resources. It also gives the opportunity for schools to demonstrate sustainable practice in energy use, water, recycling, transport and other areas of environmental management.

Schools can play a pivotal role within a sustainable community. By educating young people in a way that empowers them to take active roles in their local communities, to be able to make informed choices and to critically evaluate what they see and hear, they gain a sense of responsibility for the sustainability of their communities and the planet. This will be essential for the future. However, by itself this is not enough. Predicted time-scales for the consequences of global warming, over-exploitation of resources, growing tensions and conflicts in the world, all make it essential that other generations change the way they view and interact with each other and the environment. Learning does not stop when people leave school. Schools have a part to play: providing a role model of sustainability; providing a focus and resource for life-long learning for sustainability for the whole community.

How can other agencies help schools play a greater role in increasingly diverse, multicultural and hopefully more sustainable communities? Local Education Authorities and government departments can ensure that new school buildings and extensions not only conform to and exceed standards of best practice in sustainable building and management, but overtly and proudly demonstrate that they do so. Travel plans encourage walking and cycling to school and reduce dependence on all-terrain jeeps to get children to school, but are only effective where parents feel that their children are in a safe and caring community. Empowering schools to shrug off the strait-jacket of a prescribed curriculum and to build confidence to educate children for a changing and uncertain world is critical. Helping schools to re-connect with their communities, to view them as resources but also as stakeholders is essential in developing true citizenship and global citizenship. How can we hope to connect young people with the global community if we fail to connect their schools with their local communities? A truly sustainable school cannot exist other than as part of a sustainable community, but can play its part in making that community sustainable.

Source: <http://www.tidec.org/Tide-talk/network%20arts/inc-role-sch.html>