Wondai State School P-10
Earth Charter Story

Context
Wondai is a small rural town situated in the South Burnett region of Queensland, Australia, and we are part of the Burnett Catchment. We live in an agricultural area, with a great variety of crops grown throughout the year. Wondai’s timber industry is as old as the town itself and the local sawmill is one of the biggest employers in town. Water is obviously a very important resource for our community, which is currently feeling the strain of the ongoing drought and the effect on the economy of the lack of this vital resource.

Our school has a very spacious setting in the south-eastern corner of town with forests on two sides and the showgrounds on another. The school motto is “Deeds not Words”, and it caters for 270 students from prep (6 years) to year 10 (15 years), which allows for sharing and learning across sectors. Wondai State School P-10 has a sustainability ethos, and is part of the Reef Guardians program, the Green and Healthy Schools program and the Sustainable Living Challenge.

Objective
The process of incorporating sustainability into our curriculum really began in 2004 when the Curriculum Implementation Committee recognised the potential of student-directed action learning as a means of engaging students in real life learning. This decision was based on the success of a year 9 science trial unit in 2003 that used the action research model to investigate the issue of increasing salinity in our local community. This unit was so successful in engaging learners that it was decided to develop a secondary elective subject called Action Science based on this model. This commenced in 2004 and ran in semester 1 each year until 2007 when it was decided to run Action Science all year. Students in this subject investigate local environmental issues and formulate action plans to make a difference. From this simple start, environmental issues and awareness became more of a focus in the school and our sustainability journey had started.

The next significant event to take place was having a teacher and two of our students attend the Earth Dialogues International Conference in Brisbane in July 2006 as part of the Education Queensland Student Delegation. This involvement fuelled the idea that although what we were doing in our own little corner of the world was very valid and important; we were missing the big picture! To be truly educating young people about sustainable living we needed to also tackle the issues of poverty, peace and politics on a global scale and to do this we needed to embed the Earth Charter as the underlying philosophy of our curriculum decision making. After discussing this idea with our principal and then teachers at a staff meeting, we decided to use the simplified version of the Earth Charter from the Dutch children’s poster that outlines the four main pillars of the Earth Charter: -

- Be kind to each other, the animals and the plants (Respect and care for the community of life)
- Take good care of the environment (Ecological integrity)
- We are all equal (Social and economic justice)
- Say yes to peace and no to violence (Democracy, non-violence and peace)

These principles were used in 2008 and beyond! The implications for a school community if all the members of that community upheld these four very simple principles were both exciting and challenging, and the potential for engaging students in real life learning and improving student outcomes significant.

Methodology
The decision to implement the Earth Charter principles was enhanced by the fact that they meshed very easily with our existing school vision “Grow Together - Produce the Best” which is in turn supported by our
RAPP (Respect, Academia, Participation and Pride) values. Our whole vision/values support the Earth Charter’s four basic principles. We have a whole school approach to supporting the positive mental health of our children, and this has led to the primary school’s involvement as one of 50 schools in the National trial for “Kidsmatter” (lead by Australian Principals’ Association, Federal Government, Beyond Blue and Australian Psychologists Association). Through Kidsmatter we have endorsed “Program Achieve/You can do it” as a major focus for the development of positive social and emotional learnings for our primary students. This program focuses on 5 keys to success - Confidence, Persistence, Organisation, Getting Along & Resilience. Our secondary GRAB program ensures that all of the key concepts in primary are extended through - in fact, some of secondary actions lead the way for primaries. We believe this approach to developing in our children, the skills they need to be confident and capable members of society, matches perfectly with our RAPP and Earth Charter values.

Our Earth Charter methodology is quite simple:

- embed the Earth Charter principles in unit planning and school decision making
- refer to the Earth Charter whenever possible in daily classroom life
- act as role models and persevere, persevere, persevere!

The first step in the process was releasing teachers in planning teams to map out how the Earth Charter could be used as an underpinning philosophy for current and future units of work or those being planned. This also gave teachers an opportunity to look at available Earth Charter resources eg DVD, posters, web resources and all teachers were given Earth Charter posters to put in their rooms. The end result of the day was our 2007 Sustainability Action Plan, which encompasses the areas of curriculum, grounds and environment and resource management. We have found this method of planning for the year very positive and beneficial as it provides an overall picture of where the school is heading and also acts as a tracking tool throughout the year to see how we are achieving the targets we have set.

In some units of work being taught the Earth Charter is a major theme, and in others it is an underlying thread. An example of the former case is our term 2 year 8 GRAB unit (1 x 70 minute lesson per week for 10 weeks) which explored the theme of “interconnectedness” and how it linked to the Earth Charter. GRAB is our social skilling program and stands for Goals, Relationships, Attitudes, Beliefs. This unit investigated three authentic learning questions:

(i) How will a more sustainable world help me?
(ii) How can we use the resources in our environment and maintain biodiversity?
(iii) How can our water resources be used more sustainably?

Students began by learning about how children live in other parts of the world using computer and online resources, and culminated by producing a powerpoint presentation about the Earth Charter and sustainability, including ways to build a sustainable world. During the course of the unit students also brainstormed some actions they could take as a class to live out what they were learning. These included organising a “walk to school” day to combat greenhouse gas emissions, making banners and posters to display, having an Earth Charter stall at the school fete, having a multicultural cooking day, and organising Earth Charter wristbands for staff, students and the community to wear. Some of these actions have taken place and others are yet to be organised. The most rewarding aspect of this unit has been seeing students enthusiastically and actively engaged in discussions and decision making as part of their learning, rather than sitting back as passive learners.
Units of work with the Earth Charter as an underlying thread are occurring throughout the school across all year levels and education strands. Our year 6 class is currently undertaking a Threatened Species unit in which the students have taken on the role of wildlife rangers. They are investigating threatened species with the job brief of designing sustainable habitats for these species and presenting their findings to an audience. Students have completed research reports on their species and are building models of the habitats they have designed. They are also organising a Threatened Species Day event for the school on Friday September 7. Again this unit of work has been designed so that the learning is student-centred, with action learning occurring within a real life scenario rather than simply learning about threatened species. It is based on our Earth Charter principles and the big picture concept of respecting those with whom we share this Earth, and living in a way which doesn't impact negatively on their wellbeing or our environment.

Another example of this type of learning is occurring in our year 5 class, which has been conducting an electricity audit of our school and developing a plan to reduce our energy consumption. Students have been actively involved in investigating the numbers and types of appliances we have in the school and the impact their use has on our resource management. They have produced wonderful clay animations to promote sustainable energy use. The emphasis again is on learning “for” sustainability and not learning “about” sustainability with students developing understanding and skills for lifelong learning and action. The teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher of content, and the student actions are developed to encompass a global picture as well as have a local impact. Students consider the following questions: Why are we concerned about our school energy use? How does our energy use affect us locally? What does our Earth Charter say? How will reducing our energy use here help our Earth and others living elsewhere? How can we teach others about sustainable energy use?

Action Science is a lead Middle Phase of Learning strategy at Wondai P10 State School and is one of our curriculum success stories. It is an environmental science elective that investigates local issues using the Action Research model. This is being achieved through the delivery of a practical, real life learning model for students. Our approach embraces our young people’s initial abstract thinking about global issues, by linking in to every day local environmental problems. Action Science has probably always been underpinned by the principles of the Earth Charter even though we didn’t formally recognize this. However, our implementation of the Earth Charter into our school curriculum has added another very positive dimension to Action Science, as students are now able to see more clearly the importance of their work locally in terms of it’s global impact as well. It reinforces the idea that we all have a role to play in creating a sustainable future, and that each positive action contributes to the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants.

Key features of Action Science are the development of:

- Entering, life long learners, who regularly and are actively participating in our local catchment issues and therefore the global environment.
- Our learners as investigators of local area sustainability issues, through the adoption of an Action Research Model.
- Partnerships with local landholders, private businesses, government departments (including Department of Natural Resources, Kingaroy), Burnett Mary Regional Group (BMRG), and the Burnett branch of the Queensland Rural Women’s Network.

The Action Science elective is available to all students in years 8 - 10 (13-15 year olds). The program format allows students to choose a work team to join based on their interests and skills, which ensures inclusiveness and maximum participation of all students regardless of their academic or behavioural history. For example, in 2006 the students have brainstormed...
and then formed four teams – Stormwater, Litter, Water Use and Energy – to address the issue of resource management within our school.

Examples of activities carried out by the Stormwater team include:

- Liaising with the school groundsman to map out the stormwater drains within the school and taking photos to be used in a display
- Cleaning a number of school drains which were full of leaf litter from the building gutters
- Designing and painting "Clean Seas for Me" signs next to the stormwater drains to emphasise the school’s Reef Guardian status and encourage students not to litter
- Liaising with school principal and Head of Department re painting of signs
- Writing thank you letters to the Wondai Shire Council for assisting with guest speakers
- Writing of action plan
- Publishing of action plan

In 2007 Action Science targeted the scrap paper usage of our school as the area of investigation. Students put a scrap paper box in every classroom and collected the paper once a week and weighed it to see how much each class had collected over the week. Then the paper was sorted into two piles – paper which had been used on both sides and paper which had only been used on one side. The scrap paper was used to manufacture useful products – paper bricks and notepads. Some of the scrap paper and newspaper was used to make carry bags for the bricks, which students hope to eventually sell. Students also spoke to the individual classes letting them know that they needed to consider reducing the amount of paper they were using.

The following comment by the action science students supports the curriculum model of student-centred action learning. "We believe our project is important because it reduced the amount of waste going into landfill and it increased awareness about the amount of paper waste in the school. It was great to recycle the paper into something that could be used again."

We have found that by encouraging students to develop plans and carrying out activities that they feel they can achieve and which use the skills they have to offer, the engagement level is extremely high, particularly with students who do not engage with the curriculum in other areas.

Problems/Lessons Learnt

So far, we have not experienced any major problems with our integration of the Earth Charter into our school life, and the staff of Wondai State School have embraced our four simple Earth Charter principles as very positive and important values to encourage students to develop in their own lives. From the beginning, it was stressed to staff that the idea wasn’t to work harder or change everything we were already doing, rather to look for opportunities to incorporate the Earth Charter into the great work that was already being done in classrooms throughout the school, and to use it as an underpinning philosophy for future planning. New Earth Charter and sustainability initiatives are always discussed with our administration team first and then teachers, to ascertain whether there is support from staff to ensure the success of the initiative. Positive support from the school community as a whole is vital to moving forward on our sustainability journey.
Now that we have started down the Earth Charter track, we will be able to discuss at our next planning meeting in early 2008 how to consistently write the Earth Charter into planning documents across the school. We have taken a very multi-faceted approach and students regularly encounter the principles in their daily activities. We also try to reach out into the community through newsletter articles, noticeboard signs and our school choir will be performing a number of environmental songs by recording artist Rosie Emery (based in Florida and co-producer of "The Little Earth Charter") at our school fete. Anecdotal comments by parents and community members to date are very positive.

Our biggest challenge right now is exploring how to write the Earth Charter into our school plan, which is currently being reviewed. We are particularly interested in using student centred action learning to not only engage learners in the curriculum, but to provide improved holistic student outcomes which can be assessed to provide concrete data. We believe there will be a positive correlation between increased engagement and improved behaviour outcomes for some students.

We consider our sustainability efforts to be a work in progress, and every time a student bounces up in the playground and says "I put all my rubbish in the bin" or "I turned off a tap that was left running" or "we are recycling our washing machine water at home" we know we are on the right track and making progress. Our youngest students are our most enthusiastic sustainability ambassadors, and as they move through the school we believe we will achieve greater outcomes. We still struggle with typical school issues such as litter and bullying, however there are definite groups of students within the school who are working to overcome some of these problems, including three student environmental action groups which operate in the students’ own time to pick up litter and maintain our gardens.

We will be collecting some data about student, parent and community perceptions of our programs via surveys before the end of the school year, as we do not yet have any baseline evidence about attitude or behaviour changes with which to compare future data.

Will we experience spectacular results in the short term from this initiative? We doubt it, however our vision is that in years to come our whole school community will be operating in a way that respects those with whom we share this Earth, and doesn’t impact negatively on their wellbeing or our environment. We hope we will be producing zero waste through reducing, recycling and reusing, and be powered by renewable energy. "One hand can make a difference, many hands can change the world" and we believe we are in the business of teaching many little hands that they can make a world of difference!

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