In nature there is an intimate connection between every being and the universe, so it is our responsibility as environment and sustainability teachers to ensure that the children who are in our care have the opportunity to develop this connection.

St Louis de Montfort’s primary school in Aspendale is very lucky to be located on 3.5 hectares of reclaimed swamp land bordered by bike paths and wetlands. However, as we are built on reclaimed land, the soil can be very difficult to work with and we are subject to flooding. The school opened in 1964 and is therefore a relatively young school to 760 students, 28 classes and 85 staff.

As St Louis’ Environmental Sustainability and Health and Wellbeing leading teacher, I have endeavoured to develop a whole school approach to sustainability by embedding long term change in our students and school community.

When I inherited the role in 2011, I observed that our approach towards sustainability was isolated from the rest of the curriculum and had no foundation or connection to nature or our Catholic Identity. We had begun our ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic journey, we had built six garden beds and we were participating in regular education sessions on rubbish reduction and water initiatives. We held regular walk to school days, rubbish free lunch days, participated in Clean up Australia Days and South East Water Poster competitions.

All these initiatives were great but they were not providing a whole school approach to sustainability or embedding long term change in our students and school community. The school community had a quite limited understanding of nature and its intimate connection between every being and the universe or the importance of developing reciprocal relationships between humans and the larger community of life.

We did not believe that nature itself could enhance human freedom and well-being or that Earth deserves to be valued for its own inherent worth, not merely because it is valuable to human beings. We also did not have the understanding that we have responsibility to act in a way that is consistent with maintaining the natural environment as far as possible in its natural state and to show respect for Earth’s rights. As Thomas Berry writes, all beings have, “...the right to be, the right to habitat, and the right to fulfil their role in the ever-renewing process of the Earth Community.” We need to have a
mutually enhancing relationship that promotes the wellbeing of the whole Earth Community.

Where did we begin?

As a Catholic school we looked at education for sustainability in a Catholic context: 'as agents of the mission of the church, Catholic education encourages and empowers school students and their communities to take action for the common good'. We have the belief that by being present with and developing deeper relationships with creation, restoring the social balance and learning to live sustainably we are all enriched. 'Enough for ever for all' is being embedded into each year level and class room through hands-on learning.

We believe that empowerment through education is a critical tool for achieving sustainability. We trust that stewardship is a call to service, "that creatures exist only in dependence on each other to complete each other in the service of each other."

We also believe that an intimate connection to nature improves student wellbeing and that every human has a fundamental right to an environment of quality that permits a life of dignity and wellbeing.

Our ecological education learning spaces provide an environment where students can engage with the larger community of life. This is fundamental to the development of the wellbeing of all students. The Vitamin N for Nature research states that: 'A growing body of evidence and research proposes that time spent in more natural environments (indoors or outdoors) can reduce the symptoms of attention disorders, and improve cognitive functioning as well as creativity, socialization and mental and physical health.' The study completed by Andrea Faber Taylor and Frances E. (Ming) Kuo, found that these symptoms improved when the activities were performed outdoors in green spaces instead of indoors or in built outdoor settings. The effects were consistent in both boys and girls.

By providing our students with a 'hands on' back-to-nature approach in outdoor settings we are able to support student wellbeing and mental health as well as educational development, socialisation skills, class dynamics and connection to our faith and our Earth.

Another major factor was that we saw the opportunity for St Louis to become an exemplary sustainable school demonstrating an intimate and original connection with nature. We became a school community from which other schools could learn and model themselves.

How was this achieved?

a) Supportive Leadership

Supportive Leadership is essential and our principal Tom Lindeman has been an advocate for changes at St Louis. This leadership has allowed sustainability to be front and centre of all that we do. Resources and teacher time have also been allocated to transition sustainability into the whole of school approach. Teachers and staff are encouraged to share and develop their sustainability ideas and initiatives.

b) Supportive Team and School Community

Having a supportive team is essential to achieving great results. We have engaged teachers who follow contemporary practices to achieve the best outcomes for all students. We also have a fantastic garden to kitchen team who are passionate about our sustainability and believe in its importance in relation to student wellbeing and building school community.

c) Establishing explicit goals

to become an exemplary school in sustainability.

- to implement a five year sustainable school Education Precinct designed by RB Landscapes incorporating exciting infrastructure
- to source funds to pay for the infrastructure and the program and source community support
- to develop a Garden to Kitchen (G2K) program that would cater for large numbers of students
- to link the G2K program with AUSVELS curriculum
- to expand student leadership
- to attain ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic five star certification
- to develop strategies to get the whole school community on board

Where are we now?

We believe that we are developing our community's understanding of nature and its intimate connection between every being and the universe. We also believe that we are developing our community to be agents of the mission of the church, who take action for the good of our Earth.

We have completed the first stage of the Education Sustainability precinct. This precinct includes many amazing aspects such as vegetable gardens, orchard, a chicken coop, observation ponds, grey water recycling, board walks, meandering paths, recycled tyre and slopper walls, recycled tyre amphitheatre, a bush Tucker garden, an aquaponics garden, permaculture area, rabbit hutch, bird aviary, stone paths, sheoak woodland area, swales, and wood fired pizza oven and kitchen built from re-used shipping containers.

St Louis now runs an extensive Garden to Kitchen program five afternoons a week. The Garden to Kitchen program provides 560 students per year and 140 students per week the opportunity to return to nature and experience hands on learning in a real life sustainable environment. The program is implemented through three dedicated part time staff (gardening, propagating and cooking) and all three work closely with each other.

We have gained our ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic five star certification. This means that the school's policies and practices are now aligned to decreasing our waste, water, energy and increasing our biodiversity. Examples of this are our rubbish free lunches, walk and ride to school days and paper reduction initiatives.

The school continually undertakes community leadership projects and our latest project was filling a shipping container painted inside and out with Australian sustainability themes and filled with 23 tonne of reusable and recycled items that have been sent to our sister parish and school in South Sudan.

We undertook a comprehensive review of our learning inquiry approach and changes were made that links teaching to all areas of the AUSVELS curriculum as well as our sustainability precinct. For example students learn about biological science when they research the diverse plant and animal life that exists in the garden. Another example is that the maths curriculum is brought alive through fractions and measurement used through real life applications in cooking classes and organic pest management sessions.

A strong student leadership program is also a vital component of
our whole school approach. During this leadership program we empower the students to design, research, build and promote sustainability in the school and wider community. The student leaders also take part in *Take Action: Make a Difference.*

This includes:
- Organising water and waste parades to promoting sustainability programs;
- Running rubbish free lunches;
- Delivering presentations at ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic awards, Big Green Schools Festival and Kids Teaching Kids conferences;
- Creating and delivering sustainability information sessions at events (most recent being hands-on sessions for 300 parents at our Sustainability Precinct Launch).

Our partnership with Kingston Council has been extremely productive as have our partnerships with the Dolphin Research Institute, the Catholic Education Science department, the Royal Botanical Gardens and other organic schools.

As former Federal Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus said in his speech to the Australian Parliament on 18th February 2014: 'I congratulate St Louis on the wonderful educational initiative. Sustainability should be an increasingly important part of all Australian students’ learning as we grapple with how best to care for our land and protect it for future generations. St Louis De Montfort’s primary school should be proud of taking the lead in developing and trialling applied environmental education though their sustainability kitchen and garden.'

This is something that does not happen overnight – it is a long term journey but it is certainly happening.

**References**

- Education for Sustainability in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (Catholic Education Office 2013)
- Julie Wynne holds a Masters in Education and Post Graduate studies in Wellbeing. She is Wellbeing and Environmental Leader at St Louis De Montfort’s Catholic primary school and has been instrumental in the school’s outstanding success in this field.