St Louis - A whole school approach to sustainability

Julie Wynne

When I became St Louis de Montfort’s leading environmental teacher (combined with health and wellbeing) in 2010, I observed that our approach towards sustainability was isolated from the rest of the curriculum. We had begun our ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic journey – we had built six garden beds and 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. Following these observations the teacher leadership team set the bold aim that sustainability would be incorporated into all parts of our curriculum enabling our students to be active citizens and teacher time have also been allocated to transition sustainability into the whole school curriculum. Teachers and staff are encouraged to share and develop their sustainability ideas and initiatives. For example St Louis has a comprehensive leadership program for those who have leadership potential, but their teachers stand asking what could we do to involve students that were not in the sustainability program? These ideas have led to the creation of a sustainability program that is delivered during leadership time for all the non-leadership students. The program focuses on waste, water, biodiversity and energy learning.

Knowing where you are
Knowing where you are and where you are heading certainly make the journey easier. Therefore we stopped and reviewed where we were and considered the following factors:

- **School environment**: St Louis is very lucky to be located on 3.5 hectares of reclaimed swampland. However, as we are built on reclaimed land the soil can be very difficult to work with and we are subject to flooding.
- **Existing infrastructure**: What infrastructure did we already have in place at the school?
- **Size of the school**: The school was opened in 1964 and is therefore a relatively young school. Since first opening the school has grown to 760 students, twenty-eight classes and eighty-five staff.
- **Education style**: Our inquiry approach to learning was audited in relation to the AusVELS curriculum.
- **Sustainability initiatives**: We reviewed our many sustainability initiatives such as rubbish free lunches and walk to school.
- **Collaboration with other schools**: We visited and talked to schools who were achieving great things in sustainability so that we could gain a picture of what needed to be done and how we could get there.
- **Support**: Who can support our schools’ sustainability journey?

Planning for the future
We came up with some goals:

1. **Desire to be an exemplary “sustainability” school**
2. **Develop a five-year sustainable school education precinct designed by RB Landscapes incorporating exciting infrastructure.**
3. **Source funds to pay for the infrastructure and the program.**
4. **Develop a garden to kitchen (G2K) program that would cater for large numbers of students.**
5. **Link the G2K program with AusVELS curriculum.**
6. **Expand student leadership.**
7. **Source community support.**
8. **Attain ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic five star certification.**
9. **Develop strategies to get the whole school community on board.**

- **ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic journey**: How many stars had we achieved so far?

**How was this achieved?**
Supportive leadership is essential and our principal Tom Lindeman has led the curriculum and sustainability 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 school curriculum. Teachers and staff are encouraged to share and develop their sustainability ideas and initiatives. For example St Louis has a comprehensive leadership program for those who have leadership potential, but their teachers stand asking what could we do to involve students that were not in the sustainability program? These ideas have led to the creation of a sustainability program that is delivered during leadership time for all the non-leadership students. The program focuses on waste, water, biodiversity and energy learning.

**Who can support our schools’ sustainability journey?**

**Factors:**
- **Education style**
- **Size of the school**
- **Existing infrastructure**
- **School environment**
- **Sustainability initiatives**
- **ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic journey**

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Where are we now

We have completed the first stage of our education sustainability precinct. Our precinct includes many amazing aspects such as vegetable gardens, orchard, a chicken coop, observation ponds, grey water recycling, boardwalks, meandering paths, recycled tyres and sleeper walls, recycled tyres amphibious, a bush Tucker garden, an aquaponics garden, permaculture area, rabbit hutch, bird aviary, stone paths, south food woodland area, sneaks, and wood fired pizza oven and kitchen built from wooden shipping containers.

St Louis now runs an extensive G2K program five afternoons a week. The G2K program provides 560 students per year (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 (growing, propagating and cooking) and all three work closely with each other.

We are close to gaining our ResourceSmart AusSSi 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 with our latest project being filling a shipping container painted inside and out with Australian sustainability themes and filled with twenty-three tonne of reusable and recycled items that have been sent to our sister parish and school in South Sudan. St Louis undertook a comprehensive review of our learning inquiry approach and changes were made that linked 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 – the maths curriculum is brought alive through fractions and measurement being 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 to sustainability. Our student leaders take part in our Take Action Make a Difference program where they develop initiatives that make a difference in our school context. Student sustainability leadership examples include:

- Organising water and waste parades to promote sustainability programs
- Running rubbish free lunches
- Delivering presentations at ResourceSmart AusSSi
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).

St Louis is an outwardly facing school and with this approach we have developed a number of very positive relationships with organisations and members of the wider community.

Our partnership with Kingston Council has been extremely productive and they have supported us with our sustainability journey through:

• Facilitating ResourceSmart AuSSI Vic
• Delivering student and staff education and leadership sessions
• Connecting the school to environmental opportunities
• Establishing our school environmental group
• Sponsoring and support to attend environmental events including Greening Australia Toolbox, Big Green Schools Conference and Kids Teaching Kids Conference.

Our partnership with the Dolphins Research Institute has also been very positive with the school receiving whole school, student and teacher Marine Ambassador awards. The Catholic Education Science department has supported the school with funding to develop the infrastructure and have also supported staff in continuing education in the contemporary learning of science. Our partnerships with Royal Botanical Gardens and Organic Schools has allowed students to work beside environmental experts. We have also developed partnerships with Bunnings and Mini 10 who have supported us with the development of some of the infrastructure in our sustainability precinct.

Former Federal Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus spoke about St Louis 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 teaching applied environmental education through their sustainability kitchen and garden.”

Julie Wynne studied a Diploma of Teaching, Bachelor of Education, Post Graduate Religious Education, Masters of Education and Post Graduate Wellbeing. She is the wellbeing leader and environmental teacher at St Louis de Montfort’s, Aspendale. She is passionate about making a difference in students’ lives by giving them opportunities to be immersed in sustainable education and environments. Julie believes that for improved student wellbeing they need to have the opportunity to get back to nature.

This is something that does not happen overnight, it is a long-term journey but it will happen.