

Report on the Ryde Environmental Education Network (REEN)

Ryde Environmental Educational Network (REEN) is a school environmental education network catering schools in the City of Ryde area. The network provides preschools, primary schools and high schools with the potential to expand into higher education institutions after it has been properly established.

The network builds on and streamlines the distribution of previous years (and up coming) environmental education programs for schools such as: Catchment Chronicles, Planet Protectors, interactive education presentations with the waste minimization trailer, Earth Works, Rubbish Free Lunch, Eco Garden, Materials Recover Facility visits and other environmental events and excursions.

REEN has been designed to recognize the teacher/school reality with concise and clear objectives. The network is practical and cost free for schools to join. It creates a sense of support amongst teachers and fosters internal and external networks between Council, schools, and environmental education organizations.

Program Objectives

- Meet the increasing demand from teachers and schools for environmental education support from Council
- Facilitate effective and equal distribution of internal and external environmental education programs and to create a network of linkages between Council and local schools so that these programs reach their full potential in the Ryde Local Government Area
- Formalize a partnership between Council's environmental education programs and local schools
- Develop an appropriate forum for ideas, information and opportunities relating to sustainable school initiatives
- Develop external contacts for environmental education such as Field of Mars Education Centre
- Clarify the role of Council in supporting schools
- Create a 'point of contact' for teachers/schools
- Provide regular communication by the way of regular newsletters and meetings
- Complement the NSW Board of Studies curriculum design

The REEN Survey Results

There are 39 schools across the Ryde local government area: 8 preschools, 24 primary schools and 7 secondary schools. Invitations to join the network were distributed to all schools in the area. Community interest groups and environmental education organizations were also included in the invitation and network communication.

The coordinators of environmental education in each school were asked to fill in a survey in order to highlight their current level of environmental education and to indicate where Council could support them. Sixteen schools participated in the survey, no pre schools participated in the survey.

Not every question was answered by most schools. Possible explanations include: the school had no opinion on the matter or their response was too extensive or irrelevant for their school situation.

- **Best methods for contacting schools**

The majority of schools listed multiple means of contact. The internet has become an increasingly efficient and convenient method of contact. Nine schools included email as a way to contact them. Most of the schools' answers were mixed and included multiple methods. Additional methods listed : phone (6), fax (7), and postal mail (3). Out of thirteen schools which responded to the survey question, email was the most common. Nine schools, 70%, listed email.

The schools all provided Council with a contact name. Providing the Council with a specific contact name is important; a contact name allows the Council to directly converse. This ensures good communication and flow of information between the Council and school. Since the survey period concluded further key contacts have been collected through educational outreach programs. There is an ongoing effort to gain as many interested teacher contacts for the REEN database so that further school and teacher engagement with the network occurs.

- **How is environmental education integrated into teaching programs**

The schools were asked how environmental education is integrated into their teaching programs. This question generated a variety of responses where schools indicated how they incorporate environmental education into pre- existing programs.

The Board of Studies New South Wales has recognized and implements the teaching of six key learning areas across the stages of primary schooling. The six key learning areas in the primary curriculum are: Human Society and Its Environment, English, Mathematics, Science and technology, Personal Development, Health and Physical Education, and Creative and Practical Arts. The schools which responded to this survey question all indicated that environmental education is integrated into their teaching programs through pre-existing programs formatted by the NSW Board of Studies.

- Five of the Ryde schools incorporate environmental education into the area of Human Society and Its Environment.

HSIE (Human Society and its Environment) (K-6) is the learning area where students learn about the people and the social and physical environments in Australia and other parts of the world. HSIE develops particular skills in acquiring information, using an inquiry process and in social and civic participation. It also encourages students to develop positive values and attitudes about themselves, others, the world that they live in and their future. The aim of HSIE is designed to develop student values and attitudes, skills, and knowledge and understandings that: enhance their sense of personal, community, national and global identity; enable them to participate effectively in maintaining and improving the quality of their society and environment.

- Two of the Ryde schools incorporate environmental education into the area of Science and Technology.

Science and Technology is an area in which students learn about the natural and made environments by investigating, designing, and using technology. The syllabus recognises the need for schools to address community values and to be responsive to local community concerns. It advocates that primary schools should actively promote close working relationships with parents and that they should strengthen their connections with the local community by seeking increased community involvement and participation.

- One of the Ryde schools incorporated environmental education into the area of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE).

PDHPE focuses on Fundamental Movement and Physical Activity, Healthy Choices, Self and Relationships. This syllabus is based on a broad notion of health that encompasses all aspects of an individual's wellbeing, inclusive of social, mental, physical and spiritual health. It is concerned with developing in students the knowledge and understanding, skills, values and attitudes that will enable them to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. Environment is a component of health and well being.

- Three of the Ryde schools incorporated environmental education into the area of COGS (Connected Outcomes Group).

COGS focuses on strengthening partnerships with parents and school communities in the context of a rapidly changing local and global world is very important. Such partnerships provide children with the kind of stability, support and security to develop confidence and an eagerness for learning. This in turn will foster successful transitions from home to school and will encourage high achievement.

For further information on the Board of Studies New South Wales please refer to: <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/>.

- **What are the most important changes that have taken place in schools**

Schools were surveyed and asked what important changes they have implemented recently in the school. This included environmentally based programs which schools are currently adapting. The responses included:

- Vegetable Eco Gardens (4)
- Organic recycling (1)
- Worm Farms (4)
- Composting (4)
- Waste Program (4)
- Waste Watchers (1)
- Rainwater tanks (2)
- Water Education (1)
- Rubbish Free Lunch Program (1)

- Stream Watch (1)
- Weekly Clean-up Awards (1)
- Propagation of seedlings for Lane Cove National Park

The programs above which schools have/are implementing focus on active positive behavioural changes and promoting environmental education through actions. By doing so, schools encourage and increase the likelihood of habitual environmentally friendly behaviours.

Also, eleven out of the sixteen schools have recently participated in an environmental event, and have at least participated in Clean Up Australia Day (CUAD). In addition to CUAD, five of the schools participated in multiple additional environmental events. Other recent events included: National Tree Day and Rubbish Free Lunch Day. All events were supported by city of Ryde.

- **Top project focus areas**

- Waste (6)
- Energy (1)
- Water (6)

Schools voted on the project areas which they felt were of the greatest priority. Both waste and water were viewed as the biggest priority areas for Environmental Education with one school selecting water as the top focus area.

- **Areas where council can support the syllabus**

Schools were asked to identify areas where Ryde Council can support the school syllabus. The school's answers reflected their responses for top project focus areas.

Four schools suggested Council support recycling. In particular, a few schools suggested Council re-initiate their free recycling program. Since Council has eliminated their free recycling program many schools have relied on Visy however only for paper and cardboard. This has meant that much of the schools recyclable material is going to landfill.

- Sustainable Environment (1)
- Effective recycling (4)
- Waste Management (2)
- Geography Urban growth (1)
- HSIE (2)

- **Main areas where council can support the syllabus and offer assistance**

- Money for projects
- Free plants
- Free mulching
- Weed eradication

- Developing a new environmental plan that deals with recycling and sustainable environment
- Yr8 Geography - Waste Management
- Yr 10 Geography - Urban Growth
- Free council recycling stopped last year, can't afford prices, Visy free
- Effective recycling, waste reduction
- HSIE-Environments outcomes - The sea, Wet & Dry environments, Our Local Council, Stat and Nat Parks, Antarctica, Rainforests; Science - all living things, The Sea, A place in time, Our Australia, What's the weather, Environment Matter, An ancient land
- S&T, HSIE, English

- **Schools with a School Environmental Management Plan (SEMP)**

- Ermington Public School
- Meadowbank Public School
- Ryde East Public School
- Riverside Girls High
- Ryde Public School

- **Overall attitude of the school and/ or parent community towards environmental issues associated with education**

The Council received positive feedback when questioning the Ryde area schools on the attitude towards environmental issues. Fifteen out of the sixteen schools which responded to the survey question responded with a positive overall attitude of the school towards environmental issues associated with education. Though the schools responded with positive attitudes many schools included comments and suggestions in their responses.

One school commented that there is high interest in adapting environmental issues into education; however, an outlet is lacked. This school also said they would like to implement a SEMP. Another school wrote a similar comment;

“There is a strong interest in environmental issues associated with education, but there is a need to develop a management plan which the whole school community can strive towards”.

Many schools expressed positive attitudes and a willingness to participate in any beneficial programs. One school was unsure of the attitude of the parent community, and recommended a separate survey.

- **Limiting factors**

The schools were then asked what they perceive as limiting factors in incorporating environmental issues into education. Each school provided a multi faceted response to this survey question. The dominating response was a *lack of time* to incorporate such curriculum. Teachers feel as though there is currently *an overcrowding of curriculum* in the Ryde area schools. Another limiting factor is a lack of *financial resources*.

Two schools particularly commented on the financial burden created when council eliminated their free recycling program. Schools indicated a lack of information and resources. This could possibly be a contributing factor to the lack of teacher interest commented on by two schools.

Conclusion

The REEN survey produced interesting results for City Of Ryde to consider in 2008. One of the most useful parts of the survey was getting a key teacher contact, which proved important in developing relationships between Council and the schools in 2007. It was interesting to see that most schools have implemented some sort of waste reduction program. This seems to be a fairly well developed area within schools in Ryde. Recycling proved to be the only contentious issue between Council and local schools with several schools requesting that waste management fees be lifted or subsidised. This is currently under investigation within Council.

It is evident that many schools do not have a SEMP plan and require support in developing one. Support is now available from State Government in the form of a Sustainable Schools website www.sustainablschools.nsw.gov.au and Council continues to offer support in helping schools to develop a plan. Top requests from schools for help from Council included financial assistance, SEMP development support and resources to develop new programs. Many schools expressed positive attitudes and a willingness to participate in any beneficial environmental programs. This finding has been evident in 2007 with a fairly high turn out (12- 25) of school representatives to each quarterly network meeting, high response to programs offered and positive feedback offered from schools regarding the network and newsletters.

Many schools have commented on their surprise at the amount of environmental work City Of Ryde is involved with in schools and has commended the network on many occasions. The network not only increases community relations with Council, benefiting Council's image but ensures that environmental education within schools is improving through Local Government support initiatives. It is important to remember that the network is a two-way relationship, with Council receiving many benefits from working closely with schools. These include tapping into community networks more effectively, connecting and forming partnerships with the community and creating positive behavioural change to create a more sustainable future for Ryde.

Recommendations

Schools provide a unique opportunity to touch a vast range of individuals including children, parents, teachers and other related staff. It is recommended that Council continue its support through the REEN network in 2008 and beyond with the vision of expanding the network towards gaining involvement from all schools in the LGA in the network in some shape or form. However with this goal in mind, resourcing issues must be considered. The network is manageable at its current state, however with its increasing popularity it may require more resources to administer, particularly staffing.

Schools obviously suffer from a lack of time, resources and support to develop SEMP's and associated environmental education programs. More recently there has been a move to incorporate environmental education into the curriculum rather than keep it as a separate

section of learning. For example, education on saving water can be placed into the mathematics part of the curriculum through asking students to measure water consumption through various ways and then calculate savings after water savings initiatives in the school are implemented. These types of projects join environmental education with other units perfectly, allowing the students and staff to think 'outside the box'.

This type of indirect Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD) in schools and within the community, may provide a higher rate of change than direct environmental education, which tends to keep the environment as a separate entity and can often cater to those that are interested and 'converted' to thinking and acting on sustainability. EfSD such as in the school example above provides for innovative education that demonstrates sustainability within its teaching mechanisms by holistic inclusion of EfSD in all parts of the curriculum.

Overall the REEN experience in 2007 has been a huge success in terms of Council and school developments and benefits. The future of the relationship between Local Government and schools is heading towards working together in environment education networks and the City Of Ryde is proud to be a leader in this field.

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