students and environmental action

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& Incorporating the PASTA Newsletter #52
Welcome back to the 2007 school year. I hope it has started well and that it will be both exciting and challenging! As usual, Connect starts the year with a particular focus on the formal participation of students through Student Councils. In this issue you will find ideas from primary and secondary schools about their current practices, as well as some challenges about doing things differently or more effectively.

There are also reports here from some schools that have been involved with researching and acting on local environmental issues. The six schools have been working with community groups around these topics for two years and have been successful both in building such action-based studies into their curriculum, and also in receiving local and national grants to assist their work.

It has been important to recognise the balance between the on-going complexities of this work, and the need for students to achieve ‘quick wins’ - positive and practical outcomes - within short time-frames. This been a particular dilemma with this group as students continue to try to influence behaviour in their communities.

I’ve also been impressed by the number and range of student initiatives in many areas around the environment. As its importance and urgency becomes more recognised, students are also recognising that they can and must do something to make a difference. And they are being supported to do this - to learn and act - as part of their school curriculum.

Yet many of the initiatives taken by young people are being taken in relative isolation; perhaps a project just in one school, or within a single cluster, or through a particular inter-school program. There are many more examples than we realise. (I was particularly interested to see the number of environmental action projects within the ruMAD? framework at their 2006 Conference.)

In talking with some others, I’ve been wondering whether we should plan some event - an Environmental Action Expo or similar - that brings many of these diverse initiatives together, and that enables students taking environmental action in different areas to hear about the initiatives of their fellow students. Such a platform may also be useful in enabling students to plan to work together more effectively on some larger challenges.

For example, there’s a story being told about a German student group that decided to challenge their Federal Government around conservation and climate change ... and won the ‘bet’. Something like that might emerge naturally from the opportunity for students to meet and share.

Is there anyone interested to take up such an idea and organise around it? Connect would be interested to be part of that, but is not really in a position to initiate it alone. Let me know if you think it’s worth getting some sponsoring groups together.

Roger Holdsworth

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Roger Holdsworth
The State of the Environment in Darebin
(and what we are doing about it!)

In 2006, a group of six primary and secondary schools in the Darebin local government area in the north of Melbourne have been working in Student Action Teams to investigate and act on local environmental issues.

In November, students from these schools met together for a half day at the Collingwood Children’s Farm and then at the Abbotsford Convent site to celebrate their achievements and to report on what they had done.

Northland Secondary College

Litter in Darebin Creek

Our Observations:

- Most of the litter in the creek near our school comes via the storm water drains from Northland Shopping Centre;
- We saw trolleys, bottles, cans, plastic bags, paper waste, and bricks. Except for the paper which quickly breaks down, the litter has to be removed from the creek or it stays there and harms wildlife;
- We saw white ‘water’ coming out of the drains indicating that oil from the carpark is being washed into the creek;
- The trolleys are cleaned out of the creek sometimes – there are not as many now (term 4) as there were on our first visit (term 1), but the number has varied during the year.

What we have done:

- Visited the creek and collected data about the types of rubbish;
- Made graphs of our data;
- Visited the creek and taken photos of the evidence (rubbish);
- Written letters to the Darebin Creek Management Committee, Northland Shopping Centre Management and Council;
- Spoken to other class groups about our project.

Other actions that we have discussed:

- Doing our own regular clean up of the creek near our school;
- Suggesting to the Centre Management that there be more bins and trolley bays in the shopping centre;
- Suggesting to Centre Management that there be a refundable charge for using the trolleys as at many other shopping centres but the majority of the class did not agree with this.

We have really enjoyed our trips to the creek. In addition to researching the quantity, type and source of the litter in the creek, we have done some work on water quality and have researched and observed the types of aquatic invertebrates found at the Darebin wetlands where the water quality is quite good. Very few of these animals can be found in the creek near our school.

We have become more confident in speaking in front of strangers and being videotaped. We have purchased some water testing equipment and a camera.
Preston North East PS

Our problem is that the Darebin Creek is a total disaster area! People litter the creek without giving a second thought. They dump cars that have been burnt, and there’s oil and all sorts of rubbish in the creek, which means the water quality is disgusting! There is not as much wildlife as their used to be. The reason why the creek is so important is because it supports a whole ecosystem!

Some people just don’t understand the effect that the pollution has on the local wildlife. We’re focusing on educating the community about the damage that a simple piece of litter can do!!

How did it get like this?

Most of the damage is caused by humans. They dump all of their used cars, trolleys, furniture, hazardous waste (eg syringes, petrol, broken glass), general litter and they start fires.

The Darebin Creek is situated at the end of Tyler Street and the worst thing is that there is a Shopping Centre near it and there is also a school right next to it!

We have done the following:

We:

- Created posters and brochures;
- Contacted the Darebin Council to request assistance;
- Asked for permission from Northland to put up posters;
- Tested the water quality at the creek;
- Made a video;
- Organised a clean-up day;
- Went for walks to the creek to check its condition; and
- Are educating the community about what happens when the litter gets dumped in the creek.

There’s more than one student action team devoted to this topic. We can get information from other student action teams.

The clean up day is on Friday the 1st of December. Everyone can do their bit and clean up their local area. Each grade level is cleaning a specific area in our community.

As a school you can help by forming an action team of your own and focusing on another environmental issue.

Every bit counts.
We are the Environmental Student Action Team from Preston South Primary School and we have found the main issue at school and in our local community is air pollution. We gave a presentation at the final student forum of the year about ‘The state of our environment and what we are doing about it’.

We made a poster to show others exactly what our problem is:

Our school is surrounded by many roads and streets such as Bell Street, High Street and Plenty Road. The problem is that a lot of cars, trucks and motorbikes travel along these road and create air pollution.

With the help of Thornbury High School we made a video outlining our issue of air pollution and what we’ve done about it.

With the help of the Darebin City Council we were able to build a bike shed. We have worked in partnership with the Darebin Council over the past two years to try and reduce the amount of people driving to school.

We have reduced the amount of people driving to school by 15%. We are very proud of these results but it doesn’t stop here. We plan to do more in the future.

We conducted our own research by doing car counts at a busy main road near our school, Bell Street. We found that the majority of people travelled in cars on their own and not many people car-pooled at all. We also conducted surveys in our own school to find out the travel habits of the students, teachers and parents.

These results show that in November 2005, 50% of our school population were driven to school. Since building our bike enclosure we have reduced the amount of people driving to school by nearly 15%. The amount of people cycling to school started at 0% in 2005. As of October 2006 we have 15% of our school population cycling to school.

In the future we plan to encourage smart travel options such as walking, cycling, car-pooling and public transport. We are going to give prizes to one lucky smart traveller at the end of each term. We are going to go around to all classes and educate them about smarted travel options that will decrease air pollution.

Liam, Lena, Christy, An, Gabriella, Shae, Mary and Keira
Grade 5, Preston South Primary School
Reservoir District Secondary College

Electricity Usage in RDSC

What is our task?

- Electricity usage: We want to reduce electricity to save money and help save the environment as well

What is the problem?

- Too much electricity is wasted eg lights, heaters, computers. As an environment team, we should take action

How are we researching and finding out the electricity uses?

- We’re finding the main source of wastage, checking lights during lunch and after school and doing maths to calculate the volts and power of lights

What are our ideas to stop the problem?

- Informing teachers through letters;
- Telling teachers off so next time they understand;
- Making encouragements and reminders;
- Spreading the word by making announcements and putting up posters.

Examples of some of our ideas we have…

- Balloons that look like light-bulbs. These are an attraction to attract the people so they’ll look at our note;
- Our note says ‘please turn off the light if not necessary or after use’;
- Posters with celebrities on it are to attract students and teachers to people they know so it gains their attention.

What construction have we made? Let’s go behind the scenes…

- We’ve been making posters and lightbulbs, balloon making, putting up the posters and making props;
- Visit by the TV group.

Have our plans and approaches been successful?

- The posters are working;
- The props are working because people pay more attention to it;
- But some of our ideas haven’t gone to plan eg things getting destroyed.

Luisa Liu, Esther Hoang-Le, Diana Truong, Yen Pham, Cvetan Koceski, John An, Belinda Chen, Lily Wissell, Albert Le and Amy Clemmet
Preston Primary School

We are from Preston Primary and we are aiming to make an improvement to our environment. Last year a student survey revealed that many students in our school would like a place to relax, enjoy peace and quiet and hear the sound birds chirping amongst the native vegetation.

What we have now

Most of our playground now is either under buildings or covered by asphalt. The rest is in a state of neglect. You cannot find a place to talk without footballs and soccer balls zooming past. All of us have decided to change the way it looks and give it some TLC.

What we are going to do

Finally, we have been allocated a space to develop into an Adventure Garden – a sort of a mini version of the Children’s Garden at the Botanical Gardens.

We need to:
1. Provide water tanks to collect rainwater from the shelter shed;
2. Collect fruit scraps for the compost bin to improve the soil;
3. Build low retaining walls and back-fill with good soil to make the area more level and provide a good planting area;
4. Make some new paths to lead us along and between the plants to create a sense of adventure;
5. Create some interesting seating areas with tables and chair settings;
6. Plant a selection of Australian plants that don’t need too much water after all we are always facing drought; and
7. Mulch the garden area to reduce weeds and water loss.
8. Enjoy our new space!!!
Student Councils have found that working together in a local cluster group, enables them...

... we shared resources ...

“We were trying to organise a training day for our Student Council, but it was too expensive ... the trainer’s fees, the hire of the hall and all that. So we got together with some other Student Councils from nearby schools and shared the cost.”

“We found we already had resources like constitutions and documents to share with each other. What one school had, could be used by others.”

... we got ideas from others ...

“We heard about what some other schools were doing. This wasn’t just about ideas for fund-raising days or about meeting procedures. We also got ideas about what Student Councils COULD and SHOULD be doing. It sharpened up our thoughts.”

“We realise now that we were in a rut - we were limited by what we had done in the past ... what we thought SRCs should do. We got ideas from other schools about new possibilities!”

... we realised that we weren’t the only ones ...

“For a long time our SRC wondered if other students had faced the same problems we had. We’d read about what SRCs had done in some places, but that wasn’t the same as hearing directly about it. Then we met up with some representatives from other schools ... and the sorts of things they were doing were pretty much the same as what we were worried about. Some had some ideas that helped ... but just talking about the same stuff was useful. We were on the same wavelength!”

“If you’re on a Student Council you’re sort of on your own. In the school, you sometimes feel a bit different if you care about these sort of things. It was good to meet up with others who were interested in the same things. Hopefully some will stay friends - but with others it just helps to know they exist!”

These accounts are real stories and comments from students from several different clusters and schools. They show how students are forming and using cluster groups to support the work of Student Councils.
to achieve more and therefore to be more effective in their representation and other work.

... we were listened to ...

“Some people came to our interschool meeting from the local Council and from community groups, and they asked us what we thought about schools and stuff in the area. It really seemed they were interested to hear what we thought and they listened to us.”

“Because we weren’t just from one school, I think people thought our ideas were more important - like we really were representing what students thought.”

“They were willing to listen to us because there was a big group of us.”

... we were consulted about bigger issues ...

“The Education Department wanted to consult with students about some changes they were proposing. Because we had a cluster of schools, it was easy and convenient for them to come along to some meetings and tell us all what was happening and ask us to be involved. And they knew we were thinking bigger than individual schools and would understand the issues more.”

“Some students from the cluster group have now been asked to be regular student representatives on regional committees.”

... we supported each other ...

“There was one school where the locks had been taken off the toilet doors. The students mentioned this at a regional meeting and we all went ‘WHAT!? ’ and thought it was terrible. In fact I think we were more angry about it than the students from that school ... because they had got used to being treated like that.

“So we wrote as a group to the School Council at that school and protested on behalf of students from the whole region. Well, a bit later we got a reply - and we also heard this from student representatives from the school - that the school had asked the SRC to pay to have the locks put back on the toilet doors!

“At our next meeting we talked about this again and thought this still sucked. So we wrote again to the School Council and said we thought it wasn’t good enough. And eventually ... it took a couple of months ... the School Council agreed to replace the locks and to pay for it themselves. It showed us how students could support each other and, even though it took a long time, that we can be effective together.”
Student Councils have many functions in schools. Mainly they represent students’ needs and interests within the school and the community.

This work can place a large burden on a few people ... especially if the Student Council is small, the school is large and students’ needs are diverse.

Suppose, for example, a group of students asks the Student Council to achieve something - for example, to make some changes to the way the school responds to bullying (though we could choose any example). Traditionally, the Student Council might agree to take on the concern (bullying) as a Council issue, which would mean investigating it (how extensive is bullying? why does it occur? what options are there?), developing plans (a student-led anti-bullying strategy), negotiating with the school administration or other people (eg counsellors, youth workers, other students), and then taking part in implementing the changes (the Student Council running an anti-bullying campaign).

All this takes a lot of time and a lot of meetings. What happens to other business of the Council? (“We’re too busy to think about anything else!”

If the Student Council is successful in its work, it means there will be more and more demands about other issues ... which is great. But where does the time come from to do all this?

Even more importantly, working in this way doesn’t do anything to change the participation of those students who raised the issue. Yet again, they are asking for something and relying on someone else - this time, the Student Council - to get it for them.

But hold on: these students are the very ones who understand the issue best, who feel most motivated about it, and who want something changed. They are the ones experiencing or seeing bullying - and they want action.

So, there’s an alternative way of working. The Student Council can manage the process, not do it all. It would then enable and support those students who are most concerned about the issue to investigate it and act on it themselves.

How might this work in practice?

When a group of students raises a concern (such as bullying), the Student Council’s response could be:

a. Decide as a Council that this is an issue that should be pursued in the name of the Student Council;

b. Set up a working group of those students who are concerned about the issue (eg invite those students to be on an Anti-Bullying Task Force or Action Team) and make this a formal Student Council sub-group;

c. Appoint a member of the Student Council to support and liaise with this group - particularly to advise them about possible processes;

d. Identify and approach a support teacher to work as a consultant to the group;

e. Provide time (and expectations) on the Student Council meeting agendas for this working group to report on its progress;

f. Negotiate with the school for time (and academic credit where possible) for the working group to meet, investigate and act;

g. Publicise and support the agreed outcomes of the group.

In this way, the Student Council provides the structures to help the issue to be considered and acted on by the people who care passionately about it. And it also builds a broader base of student participation in the school. It directly provides a challenge to traditional and hierarchical ways of working in Student Councils, where only a few students are chosen to ‘represent’ or ‘act on behalf of’ the broader population of ‘passive’ or ‘uninvolved’ students.

This approach is particularly important where the students raising the concern are not those normally interested to be on a Student Council, or are even those disengaged from school or cynical about school processes.

The role of the Student Council is then to build active participation by all students - not to be a small or elite group with sole responsibility for all student initiatives.

Roger Holdsworth

Connect would be interested to hear of examples of this way of working by Student Councils.