

Landscaping to Learnscaping

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Since Chatswood Hills State School's establishment in 1983, we have been honoured to win five state and four national environmental awards. Not a bad feat for such a young school! These awards have certainly been very rewarding, and have helped motivate us and encouraged us to strive to do well in this area. However, the real reward has been the attitudes towards and feeling for the environment which winning these has helped to engender in the children at our school. A special place, our place!

At Chatswood Hills School environmental education consists of two strands: Project Club and annual, whole school thematic activities. Although these two were independent ideas, the longer we have continued the more the two have become entwined.

Project Club

‘benefits for students...have...included...their increased...enjoyment in a shared project and a deep commitment to their environments’



Whole-school tree planting

Begun in 1986 the ‘Birds and Trees’ Project Club this year has been ‘in the hands of’ a group of Years 5–7 students in that they have elected an executive, held fortnightly meetings, raised fund, ordered goods, signed cheques and sent off payments for their bills. Project Club has literally taken over the back corner of the school grounds in

creating a rainforest and a wildlife habitat area. Students manage the breeding of endangered native finches, recycle bottles and have established a school-wide composting program. Over the years they have planted thousands of trees, paved pathways, cemented garden edges, laid hundreds of metres of irrigation, bought tools and a tool shed, propagated thousands of plants, turfed, pruned, watered, mown and cared.

Some of the more obvious benefits for students involved in Project Club have been their increased ability to work co-operatively, independence, decision making, problem solving, responsibility, enjoyment in a shared project and deep commitment to their environments.

Whole school thematic activities

‘students have been involved in creative and relevant activities across the school’s curricula’

Each year, a committee of interested teachers is formed, ideas generated around a theme and all the school staff involved in the direction given the theme by the Committee.

A recurring theme has been ‘Keep koalas in our community’ which has focused on the visits to the school grounds by local koalas whose population was becoming threatened. Early childhood student have concentrated on activities centred around ‘What?’—What do koalas eat? What do they look like? What do they need? Middle school students have considered questions of ‘Where and when?’—Where do koalas live? When do they sleep? When do they migrate?, while upper school students dealt with ‘Why, how and who?’—Why are koalas endangered? How can they be protected? Who can be contacted for information? Who is helping koalas?

Other whole school themes have included: ‘Beat the heat’ which focused on the threat of fire to koala habitats; ‘The tree is the key’ which broadened the attention we gave to wildlife and considered the need to recycle paper and other materials to protect natural resources; ‘Let’s propagate’, a hands-on approach to the environment inspired by the school’s new shade house and a current Learnscaping project at our school. In keeping with the new Learnscaping project theme gardens three groups of students in the school studied different kinds of food trees; early childhood, middle and upper school students considered respectively food trees for koalas, for habitat in general and for humans, especially Australia’s Aboriginal peoples.

In conjunction with the classroom work developed by teachers to fit within yearly themes other whole school activities have been held. These have included: an annual sponsored walk, ‘Koalathon’; photographic competitions;

arts festivals; rap dancing teams; 'Target Tonne', a community collection of aluminium cans; publication of related books; and others.



Koalathon—one aspect of students supporting koalas

Motivated teachers over the years have approached these one-term themes enthusiastically and students have been involved in creative and relevant activities across the school's curricula including: developing and exploring board games; writing poetry, songs and letters; mass and measurement activities; project research; making charts and posters; sewing, quilt making and screen printing; paper recycling and so on.

Over the years this kind of work has been assisted by valuable links established between the school and outside agencies, particularly with the Australian Koala Foundation and, more recently, with several lecturers from the Queensland University of Technology.

Our future

*'our task.....is to turn our wonderful
landscaping into learnscaping'*

A major element in the school's future environmental education actions is the Learnscaping program. In late 1994 we were fortunate to receive a \$275000 grant towards our grounds improvement because of a freeway extension through our koala habitat. A committee of interested teachers and parents was formed with the overall goal of 'learnscaping' the school. After many long hours and some very interesting discussion and learning, we finished our grounds work in late 1996. We now have nine theme gardens: scent; colour; line and shape; texture; the koala corridor which was redefined during landscaping; rainforest and habitat, two existing Project Club gardens; Aboriginal people's foods; and shade house growing.

Our task in 1997 is to turn our wonderful landscaping into learnscaping and to this end we intend developing a series of activities to enhance each of our theme gardens. We are hoping to help the students to develop a sense of ownership and have embarked upon the theme 'Explore outdoor'; early childhood students will be exploring the topic 'Birds' using the Scent and Colour theme gardens, middle school

students will focus on 'Marsupials and Monotremes' within the Koala Corridor and upper school students will study 'Reptiles and Amphibians' in the Rainforest, Habitat and Aboriginal Food theme gardens.

Animals, particularly animals found within our school and local area, have been chosen as subjects for study and our major focus is intended to be weaving all these into three stories about our learnscaping with the assistance of a storyteller. The stories will be devised by students and will help to guide visitors along a trail from garden to garden.

This year also sees us preparing to write a formal Environmental Education Program that will enable present and future teachers and students at Chatswood Hills, other local schools and community members and organisations to utilise the learnscaping gardens fully. Despite its not having a formal environmental education program the school community has achieved some very successful outcomes in that aspect of curriculum. However, we believe that it is essential that we now establish such a program for the full benefit of the Learnscaping gardens to be realised. Flexibility, creativity and relevance have always been an important key to the success of the school's environmental education; we intend to ensure that they are underlying threads of the written program.

Overall

*'it's surprising what happens as people take
ownership of the projects at hand'*

Environmental education at Chatswood Hills School certainly hasn't been traditional, written down or set in cement; perhaps it has worked well because of this. Whatever the factors in our achievements we are all very proud of them.

What's needed to get your school going? Easy! A principal who appreciates and encourages innovative thinkers and believes in the advantages of whole school ownership; a dedicated, creative, self-motivated staff; a supportive community; involved children; and a love of the environments we share. Doesn't exist you say? Perhaps not, initially, but it's surprising what happens as people take ownership of the projects at hand. The secret...start small...and snowball! ☺

Wendy Thurlow has spent much of her primary school teaching career at Chatswood Hills State School developing her interests in science and environmental education and emphasising students' experiential learning. She is contributing to the school's emerging environmental education program and is keen to extend students' learning via Internet links with schools with interests in built and natural settings different to those around Chatswood Hills.
