

Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change.

A) The co-benefits of climate action in schools

What are the co-benefits of climate action in schools for:

- Student learning – Students are looking to make their education relevant to their world, climate change is something that every student is experiencing and can be linked to all subject areas. The application of sustainability concepts and principles across the whole school community through student-centred, action-based learning experiences; critical and creative thinking; reflection; and systems thinking will set students up with the life skills needed to face the challenges for the 21st century.
- Student and staff physical health -by adopting practices that reduce the creation of Carbon dioxide will have immediate effects on physical health by encouraging walking and cycling, and also by using electrical run vehicles (buses, cars and bikes) powered by renewable energy will reduce the harmful emissions around school grounds. Incorporating teaching programs that involve movement and the outdoors instead of sitting at a desk will increase physical health.
- Student and staff mental health – most people are aware of the huge problem the world is facing through climate change. Many can feel overwhelmed and it may contribute to anxiety and depression. However, by providing small actions of how individuals can make a difference will give people hope and provide a pathway to a positive future where they are part of the solution and not just part of the problem. We need to teach students how to work with uncertainty and not feel overwhelmed by it, providing them with life skills of how to deal with change.
- Financial savings in the education system - The education system has many cost areas. This means there are many ways for savings to be found. By focussing on reducing resource consumption from fossil fuels schools can reduce their impact on the climate as well as make financial savings. A number of examples: making buildings energy and water efficient, capturing water and using on site, recycling water where possible on gardens and lawns, capture energy from the sun and use it to power the school, using IT more effectively to deliver teaching programs, using forest stewardship paper when paper is required and compost all food scraps. Many of the initial costs of these initiatives are expensive, making them difficult for schools to implement.
- The community – Any climate action in schools will flow through to the community as it reaches out to other organisations and fosters collaboration using 'real world' issues as projects. Through this networking community ideas can also be shared through to the school and the learning benefits both groups.
There is the hope that sustainable practices taught in schools will flow through to student's homes.

Are these co-benefits recognised and promoted? Depends on the school and leadership, if there is a sustainability committee many of these activities are recognised and promoted through the various channels, but without a sustainability committee the benefits can be lost as everyone is busy looking after their own area. An overarching policy, promoted by Government agencies may assist in this.

Is there an opportunity to cross-promote existing environmental and health activities being undertaken in schools as climate action? – Definitely yes, but only with a framework that captures the benefits and channels set up to recognise the benefits. Again, a sustainability committee is essential for this where members come from all aspects of the school – teaching staff, admin staff, students and parents.

- B) Climate change mitigation and adaption actions currently being undertaken in schools and the benefits they are achieving.

How and why have these actions been initiated within schools? Generally carried out by passionate people, both teachers, parents and community members who care about the future of the planet and want to help students learn life skills to deal with the issues past generations have created.

The Committee is particularly interested to hear about examples of climate action in schools which:

Are low or zero cost Zero cost doesn't exist without valued volunteer time. The committee feels we need to recognise there is a cost in all we do and value it. There are some simple programs and processes put together by schools such as waste scrap collection and composting and cross curricular integration of climate change content into teaching.

Have been locally developed There are many locally developed initiatives that the Great Southern Education for Sustainability network tries to share amongst teachers to encourage the cross fertilisation of ideas and activities, but this depended on teachers having the time to come to our quarterly meetings and read the minutes.

Involve community partnerships There are many community partnerships, but these wax and wane depending on who knows about them and can sometimes be prevented due to complex rules by the Department of Education.

Are Aboriginal-led and recognise indigenous knowledge In the Great Southern we are fortunate to have strong connections with the indigenous groups. The difficulty is finding the time for teachers to rethink their delivery and find new ways of doing things.

- C) Barriers that schools encounter in undertaking climate action and how these can be addressed

Barriers may include (but are not limited to):

Complexity Navigating the department of education systems and processes makes it difficult for parents and the general community to be involved.

Resources and cost -Parents & Citizens often raise money to get certain items like solar panels and water tanks, however ongoing costs make it difficult to maintain.

Policies and regulations – Policies can often be confusing and difficult to access. It is suggested that these policies can prevent solar panels being installed and also activities being run during school time.

Reluctant attitudes towards climate action – Changes to the government which is in power make long term decisions difficult to make plans for.

There is also a feeling that the curriculum is too crowded, however by incorporating climate change throughout the existing curriculum and where possible encouraging teachers from different units to collaborate and create a project/unit that addresses multiple skills at once would solve this problem.

Funding for environmentally friendly processes and infrastructure can be expensive- often preventing schools undertaking such initiatives.

D) What more can be done to support schools to respond to climate change

How can capacity be built within schools to prepare for and respond to climate change? Schools require a budget to support staff time to coordinate different aspects and allow for staff to get involved in different activities.

In addition to this a resource person within the department that has training and qualifications in sustainability that schools can access easily to assist in embedding their initiatives into their school.

Funding needs to be available for environmentally friendly initiatives.

How can schools be equipped to make well informed decisions about undertaking climate action? Well researched policies that outline steps for funding application and recommended minimum sustainability goals for assets and teaching curriculum.

How are schools outside WA being supported to undertake climate action, and could aspects of this be adopted in WA?

We are not across everything in other states, but we do know there are many programs out there- see below. The most crucial factor is having someone in the school who is given time and money to coordinate these projects in each school. A coordinator becomes the person who can ensure programs are continued and built on and provide support to teachers wanting to incorporate it into their teaching. One day soon we hope to see schools support a new approach where multiple disciplines combine to teach one project giving students a 'real world' learning experience where students can see how each discipline is required to solve 'real world' problems and become engaged in finding solutions.

<https://www.eco-schools.org.au/>

<https://www.climateclever.org/>

<https://qed.qld.gov.au/programs-initiatives/department/building-education/major-projects/cooler-cleaner-schools>

<https://www.solarmyschool.org.au/>

Signed

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