

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change

Back in the day the nominally environmentally friendly (forerunners of sustainability movements) might have chained themselves to an old growth tree to disrupt clear-felling. Jumping to nearer times one's attention might be arrested by a burning pram on the steps of parliament to highlight a cavalier attitude to the next generation of humans. And nearer home the latest version of awareness raising to come to mind is someone supergluing their feet to the pavement outside a local member's office (I am human, I am here, and I matter). I am not drawn to these techniques, but I am very keen that people become more aware of, and responsive to, what is needed for a healthy and sustainably managed environment. I am also very keen to point out that this outcome requires resources, most specifically allocated money that values human energy and time.

a. Co-benefits of climate action in schools

What are the benefits of climate action in schools for?

Student learning

Opportunities to learn about the impact of weather fluctuations (which ultimately coalesce into climate change) on the environment, particularly in relation to WA. E.g. the rainfall amount for the SW of WA has been in general decline for over 50 years. This is putting stress onto 'left alone' (ie no specific use by humans) ecosystems, and on crop production. Much could be learned about how ecosystems are adapting to changes and how this latest change fits into the longer timelines of SW of WA as it is my understanding that a steadily drying climate is one part of why we have a global hotspot for flora diversification. Students could also learn about the ingenuity of WA primary producers in adapting to these fluctuations with the use of new technologies. It is my understanding that farmers are increasing yield although natural conditions are making their work more problematic.

Student and staff physical health

It has been remarked that students as young as 3 years of age are entering an education system that may be characterised as an office-based workplace: desks, chairs, books, computers and whiteboards abound. Learning about climate action brings opportunities to be in the outdoors environment rather than indoors. This in turn gives people the opportunity to use the tools of the classroom outside. For example establishing a garden and devising ways to best manage the garden for food production bring students directly in contact with how their food is grown and how they can improve how food is grown; or how to create optimal environments for the plants themselves. Students can replicate 'left alone' environments through research with knowledge bases of prior studies and/or indigenous people with cultural presence and memory of the local area.

Student and staff mental health

All learning is of potential benefit. What could be more beneficial to peoples' sense of being than increasing people's understanding of the dynamic world in which we live? Learning of the dynamism of the environment may be augmented by a deep understanding of the processes by which human life sets its being. As for students, opportunities for staff to move beyond the classroom may assist with additional body motion through the day, fresh air redolent with the odours of turned earth and blooming flowers, medium and far horizons on which to rest the eyes, and the reward of labour in producing real commodities.

Financial savings in the education system

Solar panels reduce energy costs over the medium to long term. Water tanks reduce water costs over the long term. Reducing paper use lowers purchasing costs. Reducing lighting the same. Switching off when not needed increases the life of electrical items, and energy use thus lowering resource costs.

Incorporating efficiencies into new builds reduces the use of lighting, water, heating/cooling and thus energy costs are lowered.

The community?

Community members have opportunities to work with their children and other adults on all projects being promulgated through the school. I am aware of school-wide (hundreds of students and parents together with local council and TAFE) sowing, hoeing and growing of major revegetation plantings of local species. School P&C's have fund-raised for solar panels. Schools have created with the local indigenous people gardens featuring plant used for food, medicine and shelter.

Are these benefits recognized and promoted?

I would suggest very little promotion of the benefits of tackling climate change is currently extant in the WA school system.

Is there an opportunity to cross-promote existing environmental and health activities being undertaken in schools as climate action?

I would assume so. Integration of climate impacted activities into the Health program may be beneficial. E.g. food production (fruit, vegetables, poultry) and reestablishing 'left alone' environments would provide many opportunities for those involved to be moving in ways long embedded in the human DNA ie walk, dig, lift, move, smell, locate, compare, taste.

b. Climate action mitigation and adaptation actions currently being undertaken in schools, and the benefits they are achieving.

How and why have these actions been initiated within schools?

Mostly if not totally through the passionate concern of one or a few staff members.

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

Are low or zero in cost

Please forgive my tone but my first reaction to this sub-heading was a very ironic, "Of course you would!" So, that out of the way, there is always a cost. By this do you mean zero financial cost to the Dept of Education budget? As a person who engaged deeply with devising and implementing school-wide strategies for climate action I can vouchsafe that there is no zero-cost option unless of course the time and energy of all involved is rated as zero, or low.

Have been locally developed

I am aware of several local groups and networks that have developed plans to take climate action on a local level. Primary schools, and high schools have successfully (with undulating levels of enthusiasm and result) devised and implemented actions to mitigate climate change.

Involve community partnerships

Plenty of opportunities here. Local interaction is feasible and productive with TAFE's, high schools, nurseries, volunteer groups, Green groups, government departments, and indigenous individuals and groups. All these connections have occurred at one or more schools hereabouts.

Are Aboriginal-led and recognise indigenous knowledge

There are excellent local educational presentations by local Menang people of First Nations perspectives, and the knowledge so disseminated may have relevance to managing land resources. This may be particularly relevant in areas that are now 'left alone' and were once inhabited and used as a direct resource by local indigenous people.

c. Barriers that schools encounter in undertaking climate action and how these can be addressed.

Barriers may include but are not limited to:

Complexity

Though often touted as such, reacting to climate change at the local level is not that complex. The complexity arises with ...

... Resources and cost ...

This is the area that I have been working toward through this submission! Resources includes above all, time. Once time is enabled then energy to utilise the time available is required. Thirdly, but essential to enable the time and energy required, comes money. Over the last 15 years I have seen several schools establish top quality initiatives that achieve much but with a certain predictability fall over as the person leading the programs (usually, though not always, a teacher) finds that they are increasingly alone in their labouring. Money initially provided is diminished or withdrawn. People involved at the inception lose interest, or have their time reclaimed by other requirements (core educational matters) or move on.

If there is a genuine desire to see school/community level implementation of climate action, then a staff member or members must be able access time. For example, a half-day per week to spend on organising a committee, formulating a plan, prioritising initiatives, and implementing programs. The current MO is reflected in this very submission. The "(Committee is particularly interested in) which actions are low or zero in cost?" As said above, of course! And likely so is every campus in the land. And this comes through loud and clear from the moment ideas for climate action are put forward by staff or students. To give but two small examples. A school-wide committee devised and implemented many and varied climate actions, as years progressed funds were progressively diminished, the trend only disrupted by concerted (unpaid) action by the main instigator(s). Ultimately, an administration with very little interest in such things as good as shut off funds. Another initiative wherein students competed (in a most supportive environment) to gain entry to an "Envirostein" club where they would be closely supervised to plan and implement environmentally useful ideas, ended with the departure of the staff member leading the program – which was integrated with other such programs aimed at providing extension work for students. It only ever ran with the unpaid time, interest and energy of that staff member.

Policies and regulations

I cannot really comment here as these allow for ideas but are not realistic as the real world requires time, energy and money – in short, a genuine valuing of the enterprises to be actuated.

Reluctant attitudes toward climate action

Many's a person pays lip service to the importance of 'the environment.' In the case of the Educational setting, core business universally overwhelms climate action. It is very hard to convince a teacher who is meeting the current (unrealistic) expectation of presenting an individual education in a group setting to participate in what in the end seems like additional work, especially as it is not valued enough by the Department with real values of time and money.

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?

As climate action is not that complex so too is building school 'capacity' not that complex. Valuing of the personnel who are putting forward climate concerns, ideas responding to those concerns, and ways to implement the ideas to respond to those concerns is key. Valuing is straightforward: recognition of the person's ideas; provision of time to explore the ideas; time and space to formulate a heterogeneous group to plan for campus projects; money to allow the 'prime mover' staff member to have paid time to do the work involved, and a willingness to try ideas that may not always provide a direct link to such Department concerns as NAPLAN (and I do not imply NAPLAN is not worthwhile – it is). Moreover development of resources that are based on action learning may be very beneficial. Textbook writers could develop programs that are based on: garden planting, renewing local vegetation, and using data from solar panels. These texts must sit directly into the outcomes

teachers are expected to attain for/with students. And provide resources directly linked to syllabus expectations.

How can schools be equipped to make well informed decisions about undertaking climate action?
Professional Learning. Perhaps an approach like that taken on mandatory reporting: all staff must complete modules and renew their knowledge over ensuing years. Mandatory expectations may be a double-edged sword, but I think the overriding message is: this is important. Presenters would need to be knowledgeable and skilled in making information relevant. Moreover, the material presented and expectations flowing from the PL must be directly relevant to the classroom and lessen the workload of teachers – many initiatives have complicated teachers lives demanding teacher work that is not matched by resource provision. The PL should also not be on top of other system-wide changes.

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

I cannot confidently respond to this section.