

## **Lark Rise Lower School, Dunstable, Bedfordshire. How can working towards sustainability assist in the growth future leaders of all ages?**

### **Summary:**

At Lark Rise, we used our vision of sustainability as a vehicle to inspire staff and children towards leading change. Despite being a relatively 'urban' school, with no prior work on sustainability, our case study shows that change can happen. We have made a genuine contribution towards sustainable living in our school and wider community, and at the same time provided staff and children alike with opportunities to lead and grow. This is only the start and we are planning the next steps for our school improvement plan.

**Impact:** This work has developed the grounds into a valuable resource for learning and play. Students are re-engaging actively with their environment and the care of their world. By taking a participative and inclusive approach to leadership, students staff and parents have all played leadership roles and developed skills in decision making and implementing planned actions. Sustainable behaviours have transferred from school to home through this broad engagement and student enthusiasm.

**Key leadership role:** Distributed leadership at middle leader level, with students, parents and other members of the community also included in leadership roles.

### **Our work, our outcomes and leadership:**

Focus on learning

As a school, we have always placed a high emphasis on both staff and pupil voice and the contribution that all stakeholders can make to the continual development and improvement of the school. We have various forums which ensure staff and pupil contribution including school council, philosophy for children lessons, a strong PSHE curriculum, excellent planned opportunities for CPD and highly successful distributed leadership roles within and across the school. With such existing forums in place, sustainability was something that became part of our agenda based on suggestions from pupils regarding the school building and grounds, and from staff around the 'global dimensions' that we hope will solidify within our curriculum policy and planning.

Promoting student voice

Setting the vision together

As a relatively 'urban' school tucked in the corner of a large housing estate the children identified that our limited school grounds did not include a 'wild' area where animals and insects roam free and where plants grow. They voiced a desire for a space which was 'natural' and not over-planned or 'designed'. This place would be an area where they could hunt for mini-beasts, experiment with growing fruits and vegetables and where they could don their wellies and play. A working party was soon formed and included individuals from various

Buildings and grounds

year groups (although not necessarily the members of the school council), teachers and parents from the PTA.

Distributed,  
participative  
leadership

It was the working party that formed all action plans, who set deadlines and budget and who affected change throughout the project. The 'senior leadership team' had actually very little to do with the project apart from informal progress meetings with key personnel. **This is key!** Handing over the power of decision making and allowing children and teachers to use their initiative and judgements empowered them and enabled them to develop skills and effect change.

Student  
voice and  
leadership

Clear leaders emerged as a result of this work: the teacher and his teaching assistant took on leadership roles within the group through them actioning work and their individual contributions of time and effort in physically creating the space. Interestingly, children within this class were also particularly highly motivated by the project (possibly due to the high profile the adults within that class had created). They too took on leadership roles by leading pupil discussions about the use of space and through continual opinion gathering across the school. The adults from the PTA contributed ideas and their time and, as an organisation, funded the huge majority of the project. It was through these adults that collaborations with local businesses such as Wyevale Garden Centre were made. Thanks to their donation of fruit trees, our wildlife area has its own mini-copse!

Inclusion  
and  
participation

Looking  
beyond  
the school

Communicating  
and interpreting

In terms of diagnostics and tools used for giving the project direction, pupil questionnaires and school council meetings did contribute some way to sustaining momentum. However, it was mainly through the enthusiasm of the key personnel that the project was such a success. Dedicated and enthusiastic people are the best 'tool' that we found in this instance.

With regard to our desire to establish more fruitful global links as a school, we had as a staff agreed that events such as 'international day', the global dimensions within the planning of many subject areas, our annual school trips to France and Germany and also our hosting of international visitors from a wide variety of countries (due to our headteacher's involvement in county led exchange programmes), all pointed towards a school which was at the forefront of global links and sharing. With this in mind, we secured the prestigious 'International Schools Award' in 2007.

Global  
dimension

Many 'leaders' within school contributed towards this final end, although it is thanks to a middle leader within school who desired to

take on a directive in order to gain experience in whole school issues that the award was secured. This middle leader was empowered to make decisions, collect evidence, source and manage funding and to lead and direct the staff and children towards opening their classrooms to the concept of global learning. The successful leadership of this member of staff in turn empowered others who ran with their own aspects. Most notably, the ICT coordinator and technician who found a platform to showcase their talents regarding the communications technology available to us. Again, senior leadership's role of the procurement of the award was equal to the involvement of all other community members. Once the decision was made to encourage a middle leader to explore her skills in whole school leadership, the SMT's role was simply to facilitate and support wherever possible.

### **The benefits:**

Links to ECM,  
Healthy  
Schools and  
Learning  
Outside the  
Classroom

The most obvious benefit of our work thus far towards sustainability is the wildlife area. Plants, trees and vegetables are growing (and being eaten!) and the children are afforded the opportunity to run 'wild' on an almost daily basis. Pupil wellbeing has certainly been positively affected by this area and a survey of the children has shown that 98% of the children love the wildlife area and regularly choose it as an area to spend time in.

Buildings  
and grounds

Focus on  
learning

One cannot measure the impact that wellbeing has on performance data. However, with fewer negative playtime incidents and increased physical activity during breaks, the children are certainly more conducive to working. In their reflections, all staff have noted that the children appear to be more settled after lunchtimes and are therefore able to start learning in the afternoon more quickly.

Looking  
outwards,  
beyond the  
school

With reference to the global aspect of our work, the clear benefit has been in raising awareness of our global community and in particular, in the links built with schools from other countries. Having both staff and children involved in overseas visits and the subsequent learning and experience that they bring back to school with them is phenomenal. Evidence of these links are subtle, but includes a revamped Geography curriculum, the addition of MFL (German, French and Spanish) in all phases and in the school grounds (with ideas taken from German and Russian schools as the basis for the planned regeneration of our play areas to include more 'risk taking' activities such as scramble nets and monkey bars).

Global  
dimension

In terms of improved environmental performance, by raising awareness of the beauty of our world and by fostering an appreciation in the children of the great outdoors, their perspective on environmental issues has widened and now includes awareness of water usage, energy usage and food production. These are our next issues of focus and will provide the basis for our next school improvement plan.

Looking  
outwards -  
school impacts  
on wider  
community

The impact then, on the wider community is obvious: if the children are raising these issues in school, then we know that they are also raising them at home. Feedback from parents has been positive, with many parents admitting that they have learnt from their children and that change within their homes has happened as a result of these activities (increased awareness of recycling, children's willingness to eat a wider variety of vegetables and their desire to help out in the garden).

The school improvement plan, at the start of the year, acknowledged a need and a desire to focus on the emotional literacy of the staff and children. All activities undertaken as part of our work on sustainability have contributed directly to this end. From happy children running around the wildlife area showing care and concern through their attention to water wastage, through to happy staff presenting their learning after an overseas visit and the impact that these have had on shaping their own educational philosophy.

### Key Lessons Learned:

Three key achievements/learning points from our work thus far:

- 1) Although it is hard for many headteachers, genuinely 'letting go' and handing over responsibility (and trust) to staff and pupils can pay **huge** dividends.
- 2) Pupil voice is a term banded around an awful lot at the moment: community, staff *and* pupil voice are of equal importance and are equally valid in shaping the future of a school.
- 3) 'Sustainable living' is **not** tree hugging! It is the most important endeavour that a school can undertake and has to be one of the most worthwhile, meaningful agendas facing any school today.

Risk-taking  
to enable  
distributed  
leadership

Inclusion  
and  
participation

We feel, as a school, that our achievements in this area (although relatively small) certainly outweigh any small problem that we faced throughout the journey. Boundaries were soon overcome and flexibility and resilience became skills that all people involved in the projects soon developed.

For next year, our plans are even greater and are direct results of the activities briefly outlined here. Our hope is to tackle big issues such

as alternative energy sources and a general drive on lowering our carbon footprints.

In doing this, we hope to enlist the wider help and support of large organisations and stakeholders and in particular, use the links with our community of practice to take our ideas beyond the walls of our school and into our local and international communities.

Our commitment to emotional literacy, pupil and staff wellbeing and 'voice' will continue to form the foundations of our next school improvement plan. Extending opportunities to staff (beyond middle leaders perhaps) and children to lead on agendas will also continue as it has proven to be an excellent vehicle for developing leadership skills and qualities in relative safety.