

Monkchester Road Nursery School and Family Centre - first steps towards sustainability in an Early Years setting

Summary

The school has focussed on the learning opportunities offered by the whole school site. Using the eco-school framework and think tool as starting points, they have drawn in the whole school community into a process of audit and evaluation. Both the physical environment and the curriculum were considered to integrate them and maximise the links between the environment and learning. In addition, practical sustainable activities tackling energy use, recycling and reuse have been introduced. Thus both the concrete aspects of sustainability and the deeper thinking and learning behind them have been addressed, leading to a whole school sustainable ethos and practice.

Impacts

The school has used sustainability to deliver Every Child Matters outcomes. Through the whole school approach, students have actively engaged with the auditing, planning and delivery of the sustainability work, enriching their experience and demonstrating the value of student voice. Drawing in all members of the school community, including the governors and parents, has embedded sustainability in the life of the school. Tackling energy use and efficiency of the buildings has enabled cost savings.

Key leadership role: a distributed leadership approach

Background

Monkchester Road Nursery School and Family Centre has an ethos of providing quality early years education where children and families are encouraged to care for themselves, for each other and for the environment. As a staff we have been greatly influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach to education which recognises 'the environment as the third teacher' (Grandini, 1988, p177). Acknowledging the importance of the environment in teaching and learning compelled us to re-evaluate the whole school site and the learning spaces offered to our children. We also became committed to ensuring the sustainability of the environment for the future.

Embracing the Eco-Schools initiative

Linking to other initiatives

Joining the Eco-schools international scheme inspired us to redesign our planning and curriculum and improve the school grounds. This increased the opportunities for our very young children to experience environmental education and become active citizens, aware of the impact they have on their locality.

Involving and including the whole school community

An initial audit of our sustainability within school identified staff training needs and a programme of professional development was established. Staff agreed to make this a whole school development issue, thereby focusing attention on our collective aim to improve the environment and increase

Distributed leadership

sustainability. All staff chose an aspect of sustainability to include in their performance management targets and looked at how their other responsibilities could support the school's sustainability mission. Through tapping into our whole school strengths, distributive leadership strategies were used to maximise everyone's efforts in the same direction.

Engaging others

Parents were asked to identify specific areas in school that needed improvement and to complete a survey with their children by asking them a set of questions about school and scribing their responses. Children's views of the school environment were sought through circle time discussions and in class council meetings. Small groups worked with staff to identify areas that they liked and disliked outdoors and were encouraged to share their reasoning with each other and their teachers. They took photographs of the areas that made them 'sad, mad and glad' around school and used emotions to show their opinions of different areas.

Student voice

Inclusion and participation

Environmental review

Setting the vision

Using the Eco-school's audit tool, we carried out an environmental review of the nine key areas for developing sustainability and outlined a plan of simple changes. The SMT supported this work with the rest of the staff and governor involvement was essential. Regular meetings of the Eco Schools team kept this as permanent feature on our School Development Plan and frequently this item was included in whole school staff meetings.

Communicating and interpreting

Curriculum review

Focus on learning

Staff reviewed their everyday curriculum planning to ensure that elements of learning about sustainability were embedded in the day to day experiences of our children and parents. In PSHED, children voted for a new set of character bins, thereby encouraging them to be aware of the need to reduce litter. In outdoor education, a 'roly-poly pig' composting bin takes care of waste fruit and vegetables. The children enjoy sweeping leaves in the garden to feed to roly-poly-pig and take delight in working as a team to roll him around the garden. In Knowledge and Understanding of the World, children helped to create a bog garden using a moulded pond filled with top soil and compost. Surrounded by a circle of logs and miniature hebe bushes, this provides an interesting area for children to sit, dig for worms or search for insects.

Purchasing and waste

Buildings and grounds

An old PE trolley now functions as a gardening centre where child sized gardening gloves, tools and watering cans are stored. The accessibility of these items has encouraged staff to build gardening activities in to their everyday planning. In ICT children now know how to recycle their old ink cartridges and this helps us to top up our school fund for other gardening extras.

Networking to support sustainability

Looking outward – beyond the school

Staff co-operated with many other services in the local council and beyond to support our sustainable development. The local biodiversity officer came to give advice about bird and bat boxes, the local environment team provided tabards, gloves and litter picking equipment which children used to help clear up any litter discarded within the school grounds. Support from Encams helped us to raise money from external grants such as that obtained from Curry's 'Switched on Communities' which funded new sustainable kitchen appliances for our healthy cooking work. Old uniforms were laundered and sold as nearly new goods to support school funds and encourage parents to re-use and recycle. Our school community also now recycles old paper, card and stamps to support local charities and this increases the positive contribution we can make to our local neighbourhoods.

Local well being

Governor commitment

Our governing body was very supportive of our aim towards sustainability so that decisions made in school were filtered for their environmental impact. When new work was required on the buildings or premises, the governors ensured that decisions were always environmentally friendly. The 'think' audit tool supported our continuing work in this area, helping us to pinpoint the wider aspects of management that we needed to consider. New lighting and heating systems were fitted with sensors and local controls to increase efficiency.

Energy and water

Every Child Matters outcomes

Linking to Every Child Matters

Focusing on the nine areas of the Ecoschools audit has embedded sustainability and biodiversity within the whole-school ethos and brought the school community together to support environmental improvements. It has provided a vehicle for everyone's voices to be heard and it has made decision making and problem solving a key part of our children's experiences. The initiative helps us address the five outcomes of every child matters in a practical way with our children and families.

Health and safety are fundamental messages of the eco schools themes, with an eye on the future as well as the present.

Children are fully involved in supporting and improving their environment and clearly have a positive contribution to make.

The first hand activities offered in our redeveloped school grounds support children to enjoy and achieve in all curriculum areas.

Increasing the sustainability and efficiency of our school building helps us to reduce bills and improve children's awareness of how economic factors impact upon their lives.