



# A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE AUSTRALIAN SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS INITIATIVE WA (AuSSI-WA)



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# BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

It is increasingly being acknowledged that, as a society, many aspects of our current lifestyles are unsustainable and need to be re-shaped. The development of the *Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI)* is one such acknowledgement, supported by the recently published *National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools – ‘Educating for a Sustainable Future’*.

Sustainability is defined in the WA State Sustainability Strategy as ‘meeting the needs of current and future generations through simultaneous environmental, social and economic improvement.’ Implicit within this definition is a duty of care to protect bio-diversity and maintain essential ecological processes.

AuSSI, which commenced in 2002 in New South Wales and Victoria, aims to support approaches to teaching and learning that foster enhanced understandings of sustainability, and encourages a movement towards ‘living sustainably’. Western Australia joined the Initiative in 2005. The Initiative is funded by both Federal and State governments, and supported by a range of agencies and organisations in broad partnership at the State level.

The initiative supports considered and efficient use of schools’ resources (e.g. energy, water, products and materials) and the sustainable management of school grounds (e.g. biodiversity, waste, landscape design and vehicular traffic). In addition, it promotes key concepts and themes such as social justice, participation, human rights and cultural diversity and respect consistent with an holistic, integrated model of sustainability.

AuSSI aims to integrate existing environmental and social education programs and resources into a *coordinated framework/process*, with measurable environmental, economic, social and educational outcomes.

The initiative is action-learning based, and sees the whole school community involved in integrating Education for Sustainability (Efs) into the existing curriculum and culture of the school.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The information contained in this guide derives from the collective thoughts and ideas developed by schools (from the three education sectors) and key stakeholders involved in the pilot program of the Sustainable Schools Initiative WA (AuSSI-WA) in 2005.

Its purpose is to outline a supportive process for school communities that:

- Acknowledges and celebrates existing Efs achievements
- Enhances understandings of the processes and practices that advance a *whole school approach* to Efs (supporting the assertion that ‘*sustainability is everyone’s business*’)
- Increases capacity and motivation to engage in Efs
- Assists in the development of a ‘Sustainability Action Plan’ (SAP)
- Assists in the development of (cross) curricula programs appropriate to local context



## WHAT MIGHT A 'SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL' LOOK LIKE?

At present, most WA schools engage in many elements of EfS through areas such as utilities management, recycling programs, 'water wise'/'waste wise' activities, bushland or dune re-vegetation schemes, reconciliation activities and student resilience and well-being programs.

A decision to become a 'sustainable school' ultimately signals commitment to the idea of *embedding sustainability within the culture of the school\**. That is the *whole school* engaging in an ongoing process of improvement in the practical operations of the school and enhancement of EfS across the curriculum. This commitment builds on various aspects of existing programs and practice, and provides a clear focus for continued whole school development via reference to a supportive framework and process.

Some of the characteristics of a 'sustainable school' would include:

- Understanding of an holistic, integrated model of sustainability, and a commitment to achieving positive social, environmental and economic outcomes
- Students, teachers, parents and community members working together to develop a whole school approach (with broad ownership)
- A clear focus on EfS across the curriculum, an integrating context for learning with outcomes linked to all learning areas
- Modelling of good sustainability practice in school operations
- A focus on developing critical thinking skills
- Marketing and promoting the sustainability message to all members of the school community
- Using sustainability processes involving collaboration and team work
- Promoting equity of participation in decision-making processes
- Undertaking regular planning, reflection and review activities to enhance the ongoing development of sustainability action plans
- Practising effective change management – taking time, and using processes that involve all stakeholders

\* Some examples of activity/experience that provide an idea of 'what this might look like' in practice are set out on page 5, and further examples (case studies) can be viewed by visiting the project website at [www.sustainableschools.wa.edu.au](http://www.sustainableschools.wa.edu.au)



## WHY BECOME A 'SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL'?

There are some compelling reasons to become a 'sustainable school', and a broad range of associated benefits.

### Compelling reasons:

- Education is regarded as of paramount importance if, as a society, we are to address many of the highly significant issues that threaten to compromise sustainability and the concept of 'intergenerational equity'
- 'Sustainable schools' can provide *leadership in the community* by helping to develop responsible, environmentally and socially aware active citizens
- The collaborative nature of sustainability processes (encouraging active involvement of students) is highly consistent with the teaching and learning principles of the Curriculum Framework
- Using sustainability as a key context for learning provides significant opportunities to *address numerous learning outcomes across the curriculum*. A strong evidence base exists to suggest that using sustainability as a context in school curricula produces *enhanced literacy and numeracy outcomes*
- References to sustainability and EfS themes are highly prominent throughout the *Curriculum Framework, K-10 Syllabuses, Courses of Study and National Consistency Statements (Elaborations)*
- AuSSI-WA is an 'excellent fit' with Department of Education and Training's *Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting K-10 policy and guidelines*
- EfS provides a particularly meaningful context for values education and reporting
- Acting as a 'community hub', a 'sustainable school' can promote learning flows to and from home environments, thus facilitating broader behavioural change (supporting life-long learning)
- In a cluster of 'sustainable schools', important learning interfaces between primary and high school can be established e.g. *consolidation/positive reinforcement of skills and behaviours learnt*
- EfS supports the process of building strong, vibrant, 'connected' school communities with a shared vision for a sustainable future

### Associated benefits include:

- An opportunity to effect significant *financial savings* through effective management of utilities and resources
- Support for curriculum development with explicit links to learning area outcomes and core values
- Access to a range of *resources/equipment/programs* (through school networks and an ever-expanding body of support agencies)
- Support for developing *community links and partnerships*
- School grounds *development/enhancement opportunities*
- Meaningful, practical learning tasks for students and teachers, that can cater for a range of *learning styles* and also assist in developing *student resilience and self esteem*
- Opportunities for *professional learning and networking*
- Links to other educational projects and initiatives
- *Decreasing teacher workload* through the 'efficiencies' that occur with a focus on 'rich', cross-curricula tasks

## GETTING STARTED OR MOVING FORWARD

- Each school community is unique and will approach its 'journey towards



sustainability' in ways that best meet its particular (local) context and needs.

- Sustainability is a goal that (necessarily) engages the whole school – students, staff, administrators and parents – as learners. Developing good EfS practice requires a commitment to an ongoing process of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of learning linked to participation in a broad and diverse range of activities. A whole school approach will take time to develop and consolidate.
- Although in many cases individual teachers will initiate development and co-ordination of EfS activities, support from the school leadership team and school community is critical.
- The steps below can be regarded as broadly sequential, but may not necessarily occur in the order stated – some might be developed concurrently. This process is a guide only and will be adapted as necessary to particular school contexts and needs.

N.B. The AuSSI-WA professional learning experience 'Making the Connections' (details of which can be found at: [www.sustainableschools.wa.edu.au](http://www.sustainableschools.wa.edu.au)) provides support for this 'stepped process'.

**Step 1:** Convene a group of interested 'enthusiasts' with broad representation from across the school community. It is important also to emphasise that this group is a 'knowledge building' team rather than a group of experts. The role of the group is to develop and run a process in which the whole school participates in decision-making about sustainability as it relates to the school community.

**Step 2:** Raise awareness to begin the process of building whole school ownership. Support development of a shared understanding of what 'sustainability' means

**Step 3:** Acknowledge existing EfS activities and achievements, and identify and support interested individuals

[Various members of the group will most likely undertake Steps 4-6 below:]

**Step 4:** Continue to raise awareness and celebrate achievements whilst undertaking research and planning. It is important to acknowledge that change processes are complex in nature, and that transformations of the type considered here are necessarily long-term in nature.

**Step 5:** Undertake a self-assessment/review of current EfS activity within the school – this should involve as many members of the school community as is feasible. This process will highlight existing programs/actions upon which to build a holistic, integrated approach to EfS.



**Step 6:** Begin the development of a whole school 'Sustainability Action Plan (SAP)\*'. This will evolve and crystallise over a period of time, linking to/integrated with broader school policy processes/documents.

N.B. Build in as many opportunities for evaluation as possible, both in terms of student, and school community outcomes as well as, for example, financial savings created through effective utilities management programs, volumes of waste to landfill diverted.

**Step 7:** Continue to review, monitor and develop the plan at regular intervals, being responsive to unplanned opportunities as they arise.

\*Key elements identified as integral to whole-school sustainability action planning are outlined per the 'Key Elements' rubric (see website). This and other review, planning and evaluation tools, including 'ecological footprint' and 'social handprint' templates provide a planning support framework for schools.

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

Support for the Sustainable Schools Initiative WA derives from a range of diverse sources; a mix of government agencies, non-government organisations, community groups, education consultants, local business and volunteer agencies are all part of an ever-expanding supportive framework for AuSSI-WA.

The AuSSI-WA website (a key component of a broader 'toolkit') provides further details of the various elements of this framework in terms of technical, program and resource support.

The website includes:

- school case studies/stories
- templates for review/self assessment, planning and evaluation
- curriculum support material
- funding opportunities
- local resources and contacts
- communication tools

The primary aim of the website is to showcase school case studies and stories – examples of good EfS practice that will provide a meaningful resource in terms of inspiring and guiding other schools.

AuSSI-WA website: [www.sustainableschools.wa.edu.au](http://www.sustainableschools.wa.edu.au)

National AuSSI website: [www.environment.gov.au/education/aussi/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/education/aussi/index.html)



## PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS – EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITY/EXPERIENCE

- Sustainability Action Plans at various stages of development – for some schools with a long history of EfS activity, strategic long term plans have been developed with staff, student, parents and local community involvement as appropriate
- Story telling/sharing of experience via a range of medium including website, DVD, school and community newsletters
- Whole school visioning exercise – whole school community invited to contribute to a draft vision for sustainability/‘sustainable school’
- Sustainability committees/working groups formed to coordinate EfS activity
- Staff exchange visits to share good practice in EfS have been conducted
- Renewable energy project has seen a partnership established between a cluster of schools and local business
- Consideration given to including ‘understanding of, and commitment to, sustainability and EfS’ in selection criteria for new staff
- Allocation of resources (including time (FTE)) provided to teachers to coordinate EfS activity across school
- Local community partnerships e.g. community workshops and recycling programs based at school; schools working in partnership with local government and other agencies to care for local wetlands and bushland areas
- Cultural exchanges established by schools (e.g. indigenous culture via PALS project, Department of Indigenous Affairs)

