



In a class of their own

More and more educational establishments are becoming environmentally friendly, thanks to the Eco-Schools scheme. The writing is on the greenboard for the rest, says **Nick Kettles**

It's not quite the environmental equivalent of the Normandy landings, but it might yet come to pass – if, that is, the children, teachers, NGOs and local authorities whose inspired action is currently transforming schools throughout the UK into models of sustainable best practice and learning are allowed to have their way.

In the past two years, Eco-Schools – developed in 1994 by not-for-profit NGO the Foundation for Environmental Education and administered in Scotland by Keep Scotland Beautiful, in England by ENCAMS, which runs the Keep Britain Tidy campaign, in Wales by Keep Wales Tidy and in Northern Ireland by Tidy Northern Ireland – has seen a massive spike in schools signing up to use its roadmap to sustainability. It offers guidance on a raft of initiatives, funds and laws on nine key themes, ranging from litter and recycling to transport, healthy living, energy and water conservation. From 4,000 schools in 2006, some 11,000 are now enrolled in the scheme, more than half of UK schools.

All over the country, schools are evaluating

their carbon emissions, upgrading lighting, water taps and cisterns, changing computers from old cathode ray tubes to energy-efficient flat-screens, and, where possible, integrating the learning experience into the curriculum.

While some schools have only just opened the hatch to their uninsulated lofts, or are stuck in areas still wedded to incineration, others are well on their way to becoming carbon neutral, with their own recycling and compost systems, transport plans, rainwater-harvesting systems and solar panels.

If they successfully implement energy-reduction measures, most schools can save as much as 10 per cent on utility bills – water and heating – which, even for a small primary school, can run into £30,000 a year. With decreasing budgets and increasing costs, this is money they sorely need: UK schools spend approximately £450 million on energy each year, three times as much as they do on books, about 3.5 per cent of their budgets.

Grow and eat to sustainability

Naturally, too, given the huge cost both to the NHS in diet-related disease and the effect

food production has on climate change, school dinners have become a big feature of many schools' drive towards sustainability.

At St Peter's CE Primary in Wem, Shropshire, the school's central quad has been given over to raised beds, from which herbs and vegetables are used in school dinners, along with fresh eggs from two chickens. The school has a cooking club, and pupils get to cook with and eat the produce grown in the school growing area. School meal take-up has gone up by 17 per cent, and inspired the local authority to roll out the Food for Life 'silver menu', which favours locally and organically sourced food, across the county.

In London, Merton Parents for Better Food in Schools has set up a farm-twinning scheme with Rushall Farm in Berkshire, which will see reciprocal visits between the schools and farms to talk about growing, and give the children a chance to witness the harvest.

'It is amazing what can be achieved when the whole community pulls together,' says Jackie Schneider, chair of Merton Parents. 'It was the combination of parents, governors, catering staff, schools and local government

working together that finally got 39 kitchens built in Merton primary schools and a new improved menu.'

In an attempt to encourage teenage boys to choose healthy food at the canteen, the canteen manager at Glyn Technology School, Surrey, initiated a system of 'points' that boys could collect towards rewards, including the top prize of a mountain bike.

And, after sustained campaigning by the Soil Association, Focus on Food Campaign, Health Education Trust and many others, the Government has decided to help mend the national diet by putting cooking back in the core curriculum for 11- to 14-year-olds.

No stone left unturned

It seems that every area of school life is coming under scrutiny.

Forward-thinking local authorities are ensuring that new school-builds don't just meet building regulations, but exceed them. For example, when Hampshire County Council recently built Wellstead Primary School, it installed a horizontal, closed loop, ground-source heat pump below the school's football pitch, providing 100 per cent of the school's heating requirements with 50 per cent less CO₂ emissions than a conventional gas-fired condensing boiler.

There's the Walk to School movement, whose annual Walk-to-School Month has inspired children and parents to promote healthier living and conserve the environment. Even the environmental impact of uniforms has been put under the spotlight. Clean Slate's range of fairtrade and organic cotton school clothing is exposing the risk to children of PFOAs, a compound used to make Teflon, which is applied to mass-produced children's garments for an 'easy-care' finish.

Trailblazers, such as Brabin's Endowed School in Chipping, Lancashire, which has managed to put all the pieces of the jigsaw together for a long time now – it has won four Eco-Schools Green Flags over eight years – are now busy forming a network with other schools in the area to share good practice in sustainable thinking.

Greenwash behind the gloss

It is notable that these inspired examples of highly motivated local champions and NGOs willing to drive change invariably do so in spite of government efforts, not because of them.

For example, the eight 'doorways' of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Sustainable Schools strategy, which would like all schools to be sustainable by 2020 without setting a hard and fast target for carbon reductions, blatantly duplicates the nine 'themes' of ENCAMS' Eco-Schools, and has caused confusion among some schools and local authorities seeking to make

3 steps towards creating a carbon neutral school

- 1** Identify someone within your school – a teacher or parent who is already sufficiently informed about sustainability to be able to see the wood for the trees – who is willing to give their time to start the project.
- 2** Use the support of existing NGOs and initiatives, whose case studies offer clear evidence of deep and lasting change.
- 3** From the outset, allow the children to be involved in every initiative, whether that be changing light bulbs, planting trees, recycling or creating a new school kitchen.

sense of the huge raft of initiatives, laws and funds for which they can apply.

Not only that, but DCSF has refused to adopt Eco-Schools as a delivery mechanism for England and Wales. It was adopted by the Scottish Executive three years ago. In Scotland, sustainability for schools is a performance indicator for local authorities and, according to ENCAMS, has resulted in an increase in enrolment from 17 to 90 per cent.

Just how deep engagement runs is also uncertain.

One teacher said: 'To be honest, it's very, very hard to get these things started. It's a new concept for teachers, governors and the pupils. Teachers are not facilities managers – we're not taught about how to apply the principles of sustainability in a school setting, with relation to the running of the school. Then there's the question of time.

5 things you can do now without anyone's help

- 1** Upgrade to energy-efficient computers and light bulbs.
- 2** Implement a recycling system in your ICT department.
- 3** Reduce your water usage by placing suitable objects into all toilet cisterns to reduce water capacity.
- 4** Establish a relationship with a local farm that employs sustainable farming practices to allow the children to see first-hand where their food comes from.
- 5** Lobby your local authority to champion the purchase of renewable power through their joint buying consortia. If it refuses, opt out of the contract and purchase your power independently.

Useful websites

www.eco-schools.org.uk (select the 'resources and links' tab for a gateway to all the initiatives you will need)
www.foodforlife.org.uk
www.schoolfoodmatters.com
www.healthyschools.gov.uk
www.lewesnewschool.co.uk

We are looking to incorporate more of the initiatives into the curriculum, but that too is labour-intensive; it requires a lot of planning. And, inevitably, things get put on hold during exams.'

With so much to do, the Government's voluntary self-evaluation tool, s3, a wordy 70-page document that has already been rewritten once, is hardly a must-read for teachers.

For the children, too, especially teenagers, it's not just that going green might not be cool enough, but that there are other extracurricular choices they could be making, such as sport, art and drama – and that's before schools consider how to make the project itself sustainable, once the post-*Inconvenient Truth* fervour dies down.

Then there's the £37 billion Building Schools for the Future rebuilding and refurbishment project for secondary schools, which, while well-intentioned, has a funding gap big enough to drive a Hummer through. While it promotes high standards of energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, it doesn't make the highest standards statutory, and never provides 100 per cent of the funds required. Elements that might make buildings more sustainable (but which are inevitably more expensive) are left vulnerable to cuts by local authorities unable to bridge the funding gap but aware they can still meet building regulations.

It's true that the Government has used statutory muscle where it knows it can, like schools secretary Ed Balls' 'most robust nutrient standards for school lunches in the world' (statutory in English primary schools), but not in other areas, such as energy-saving, where a more radical approach might offend Big Business.

Fuelling the addiction

Almost every week it seems a company is announcing how it is going to teach children to be more sustainable, in a move to fluff-up its green credentials.

For example, with more than 8,000 schools signed up, British Gas's Generation Green project is not quite the equivalent of soft-drinks companies sponsoring school vending machines, but one wonders just how sincere it really is. Not only does its starter pack of 'climate-change-lite' lesson plans include a range of downloadable posters and stickers emblazoned with the British Gas logo, but also the paltry prizes schools can win include 'educational' toy wind turbines instead of real ones, and, for a limited number of schools, some 'valuable' solar panels to help them reduce their footprints by another 100kg.

Should we expect more from a utility that thinks a child's sustainability learning objectives should include understanding 'that



Pupils at Lewes New School learn are guided in their learning, instead of being forced to follow rigid teaching exercises

energy is supplied to schools, homes and businesses by power companies, and that it is paid for in the form of an energy bill? Energy bills that they will pay to utilities such as British Gas when they're older?

Not all initiatives are so stingy, but like petrol companies that have reduced prices at the pumps, the rationale seems to be that the utilities are happy for their customers, including future ones, to use less – about 10 per cent – as long as they keep on using fossil fuels.

One school said its ideal would be to generate its own energy, or at least run its premises on entirely renewable energy, but even if it were successful in bidding for money through initiatives such as the Carbon Trust, it would never be enough for something like a thermal rod combined heat and power unit. The best it can hope for is to upgrade one of its nine highly inefficient boilers.

Even Eco-Schools, in the absence of wholehearted Government backing, is about to sign a four-year partnership with energy giant EDF to help it with essential funding.

It's true that, from 2010, schools will join a

'One can't help thinking that a bigger opportunity has been missed to inspire and remodel schools completely'

scheme that will count the emissions of public sector buildings as part of the total carbon footprint of local authorities, forcing underperforming local authorities to purchase carbon credits from those who meet targets, but the reality today is still a far cry from Tony Blair's 2004 vision that 'sustainable development will not just be a subject in the classroom but... the way the school uses and even generates its own power'.

We may feel a warm glow knowing that our children are doing their bit for the environment, but is this sustainable in and of itself? One can't help thinking that a bigger opportunity has been missed to

inspire and remodel schools completely.

'Children's enthusiasm for environmental issues can become absorbed in the technical details of achieving the next level of green credentials,' says James Greyson, who runs global issues think-tank BlindSpot. 'While this undoubtedly makes schools greener and children more informed, it also enrols them in incremental "do your bit" sustainable development, which has proven to be ineffectual against the scale of damage to a world that is fast becoming unfit to pass on to the next generation.

'Today we have an education system that delivers a population with a dangerously stunted capacity for critical creative thinking and engagement. This underpins and perpetuates unsustainability, including climate change. So tackling climate change is not so much about changing boilers or adding to the curriculum, but about a radically different way of delivering a curriculum.'

A playground for curiosity

By example, Lewes New School, a small independent primary school in East Sussex, sees itself as a playground for curiosity. There, teachers claim, the learning is guided, not predetermined, and most of the day is devoted to 'project time', where groups of children pursue their expanding interests and ideas. The energy and time lost in other schools trying to coax children to 'behave' and to plod through imposed teaching exercises is freed up to do more.

Such as the potential for schools to become hubs that can inspire the local community's capacity for creating a sustainable world, led by the children's own ideas?

Lewes New School's headteacher, Lizzie Overton, agrees. 'The pace at which schools go green need not be governed by the spare time in overcrowded curricula and the spare money in over-tightened school budgets,' she says. 'Schools are ideally suited to become local demonstrations of creativity and sustainability. Getting to this vision means accepting that technical energy-use changes are pointless without considering how schools can grow society's capacity to design, create and live in a low-carbon, sustainable society.'

This might only be possible if we offer children the chance to learn that understanding the world, including issues of sustainability, doesn't come pre-packed, or that the only correct answers are the ones given to them by authority, whether that be government or business.

Nick Kettles is a freelance writer and consultant to small businesses seeking to express better their unique contribution to world peace and sustainability