



“ Toorak Primary School is fostering creative future leaders and responsible global citizens ”

# Toorak Primary School

## An Inspiring Sustainable Community

**E**nvironmental education is not a mandatory part of the school curriculum within Australia. Yet through sheer passion and enthusiasm, Toorak Primary School has successfully integrated a school wide Sustainability Program as part of their school curriculum. The school is clearly kicking goals when it comes to sustainability. The school considers the topic of sustainability to be important as a cross-curriculum priority.

Kirsty Costa, a teacher at the school initiated the idea for the program. Kirsty prepared and distributed a survey to determine the level of student interest in learning about sustainability. Many of the students expressed interest through the survey. Kirsty subsequently worked closely with the Centre of Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES) Education Team to promote and facilitate a school Sustainability Program. Another teacher at the school, Mr Coleman, took on the responsibility of creating a school learning garden.

Sebastian Beck is the dedicated Garden and Sustainability Coordinator at Toorak Primary School. He has been in the role since 2017 and works four days per week. Sebastian was part of the CERES Education Team when he was employed by the school.

Toorak Primary School's Sustainability Program has been running for approximately 12 years. All 540 children between Prep and Year 6 who attend the school participate in the program. Additionally, students from years 1 to 6 make up the "Green Team", which takes responsibility for creating and maintaining the school's sustainability projects.

There are a number of sustainability initiatives that the school has put in place. Both solar energy and rain water tanks are used. The school has its own organic heirloom fruit and vegetable garden as well as an extensive worm farm. Each week a gardening club session is held during lunchtime where all students can voluntarily attend. There is a composting system which collects all food scraps and composts them into the school's worm farm. The school records the amount of waste that is saved from going to landfill. There is also a chicken coop and run and a bird aviary. A rotating 'chicken captain' scheme is in place, where a group of nominated students are responsible for taking care of the school's chickens and bird aviary for the year.

Upon analysing the information provided by Sebastian, the overarching objective of the Sustainability Program is clear. "The program seeks to empower students to be guardians of our environment and subsequently to become future change makers and leaders in the field who put sustainability and restoring our environment at the forefront of everything they do".

The program also encourages and strengthens the relationships between the school community, its students and their parents. The sustainability knowledge students learn from the program is encouraged to be discussed and where possible implemented at home. Parents are also invited to assist with the sustainability classes held at school and the garden working bees.

The children engage in both theoretical inquiry-based learning, as well as experience-based learning covering many aspects of gardening and cooking. The program offers wonderful cooking opportunities for the students, using ingredients from the fruit and vegetable garden wherever possible. These experiences often teach the kids to go back to basics and think about what ingredients are going into the food they eat. Many recipes are made from scratch, such as banana and cinnamon pancakes. Learning about specific ingredients brings both excitement and at times surprise to the students faces. For example, when they realise that cinnamon is edible tree bark and flour is grass seed in its unprocessed form. The students also learn about sustainable and healthy cooking techniques, such as food preservation and fermentation (ie: pickles and sauerkraut).

The program is taught differently between the year levels. For example, the younger year levels learn about sustainability and survival and the dependence of human life on nature.

The older year levels learn about the role they can play in solving future sustainability problems. They are encouraged to think and speak about such problems, triggering their imagination. The older students learn that the responsibility in the future to find solutions to these systemic problems will one day fall on their shoulders.

Sebastian explains that "It is a rather powerful way to engage a student's mind by revealing to them that they will be soon be in charge of finding answers to the problems that the older generations could not provide".



The learning focus is to engage the students appropriately and increasingly challenge them to think about sustainability, particularly as they enter their senior years at primary school.

There is a process the school follows in integrating the program with the school curriculum and classroom learning. Each year Sebastian sets goals and milestones for the program which are tailored to each year level. These are periodically reviewed and adjusted accordingly.



Prior to the commencement of each term, Sebastian prepares a schedule of lesson plans with learning goals and curriculum links, through inquiry topics. The program is reviewed by the Principal and classroom teachers during planning time both before and during the school term. The program forms part of the classroom inquiry topics and therefore the students school reports.

Sebastian ensures he records positive feedback received from both students and parents on an ongoing basis which can be used for future reference.

“ Students absolutely love the program ”

Different sustainability topics are taught each term, which are influenced and tailored according to age, group, weather season, curriculum goals and inquiry topics covered in the classroom.

Sustainability classes are structured in teams, with individual team leaders appointed to promote a safe and productive team working environment. Each student receives a name badge with a task card upon class commencement. Sebastian says that this approach works well to “establish a peer-based learning environment, where students know what to expect, can learn at their own pace, and are able to build a solid skill set in a collaborative setting”. Students absolutely love the program and always looking forward to their next sustainability class.

In terms of funding, Toorak Primary School mainly funds the program. Additionally, the school relies on the support of local government initiatives from Stonnington Council and apply for relevant grants as they arise. Stonnington Council generously donated the state-of-the-art worm farm and classroom compost caddies to the school, enabling all food scraps to be recycled. The school also works together with the Green Schools Network, using their program for student incursions and excursions. The school has also received funding from the local community to assist with building the chicken coop and run and getting the chickens also.

Toorak Primary School believes that “Sustainability programs are an important cornerstone of the primary school education and foster empathy and respect for all living things and accountability for students for their everyday actions”. Students at Toorak Primary School are members of a sustainable community, having the opportunity to participate, be responsible and speak up as citizens of their school community. Importantly students can experience and understand nature within their schooling life, which can be restricted in their surrounding urban environments.



Sebastian highlights an interesting point that "The disconnect of young children from the outside world can cause biophobia in some children, which carefully curated nature experiences in safe environments look to overcome". This makes sense when we consider the way children live their lives today.

Sebastian is keen to further develop the school's program and believes sustainability should always be a cornerstone of the primary school curriculum. He would like to see more responsibility being given to the older children to teach the younger children about sustainability during the scheduled lessons. Sebastian has tested this learning with small student groups and found this method to be very successful. Students can learn many great skills participating in such initiatives, including leadership and accountability. The school is also planning on developing a student-run sustainability website. They want to lead by example and become a beacon for sustainability within both the school community and local community. Sebastian would love to introduce more sustainability classes within the curriculum, however more staff would need to be involved.

Toorak Primary School is doing their part to equip students with the skills to become responsible sustainable citizens and custodians of our planet. It is hoped that their exposure to sustainability will inspire them in the future to become involved in helping to solve the many systemic problems that exist.

Toorak Primary School would like to see their students "Be the future change makers that we need to overcome these very complex problems, whether at a local, national or global scale".

The intention is that the sustainability knowledge and awareness that is gained from the school program becomes part of students' future education, lifestyle and careers. Whether it be through growing organic and sustainable food, cooking, preserving and harvesting and understanding one's ecological footprint. There is one thing that is certain though. Toorak Primary School is sustainably inspiring their students to make a difference in the future.

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