



United Nations
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Success Stories

Scotland: one school, small steps, big results

by Jackie Cosh



© Amanda Milne, Principal Teacher, Lawthorn Primary School, Ayrshire, Scotland

“When the Amazon is gone we will have 40 per cent less atmospheric oxygen. In fifteen years we could lose an area the size of England.”

These words are spoken, not by an expert or environmentalist, but by a ten-year-old boy – Mackenzie Smith, a pupil at Lawthorn Primary School in Ayrshire, Scotland. Matthew is a member of the eco-committee at the school, where a commitment to helping the environment is embedded in the ethos of the school.

Lawthorn Primary has applied for its fifth green flag from Eco-Schools Scotland and has also received a gold award from the Woodland Trust, the United Kingdom’s leading woodland conservation charity. Over the last ten years the school has worked hard to earn these accolades, with support from UNESCO, WWF Scotland and other organisations such as Education Scotland and the Carbon Trust.

Schools across Scotland now have access to the School’s Global Footprint resource – a handbook for teachers and an interactive footprint calculator, which, through a series of questions relating to buildings, energy, food, transport, water and waste, gives an indication of carbon footprint and ecological footprint.

Action has come in many forms but most importantly the children are enthusiastic and passionate, with principal teacher Amanda Milne talking of having to rein the children in. “They wanted to ban all cars from coming into the playground” she says. “And they were convinced we weren’t planting enough trees.”

Eight-year-old Elliot Johnston talks enthusiastically of the living willow classroom which the children planted in the school grounds. “It is a big dome shape with a door at the front and a smaller door at the back. It will take five years to grow completely but we can use it just now. It can fit 60 children and has 20 windows. We use it all the time and go there to do reading” he explains.

Mackenzie is proud of the fact that the school has planted nearly 500 trees in and around the school. “Every Christmas we give The Woodland Trust our recycled cards and in return they give us trees” he says.

Every aspect of the school's consumption has been examined. In the school refectory they no longer use cling film for wrapping food, and with the help of additional recycling boxes they have reduced school lunch waste to seven kilograms per day. They also helped organise a local food week where only local produce was eaten – Isle of Arran cheese, eggs from local farms, and herbs and vegetables from the vegetable gardens which every class has.

The children may not have been allowed a ban on cars coming in to the school but there has been a sixty per cent reduction in the number of children being driven to school. Plastic bottles are reused, and a couple of years ago two litre bottles were collected and used to make a greenhouse.

Energy usage has been reduced by 43 per cent, and thanks to hippo bags placed in the toilet cisterns to reduce the amount of water flushed away, after one term they had saved enough water to fill three Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Feedback from parents has been positive with many stories of family members being nagged to turn off lights, and to think about recycling more. It has also aided the children in other aspects of their learning, from social studies to mathematics.

“We monitor water and electricity consumption” says Ms Milne, “and we draw graphs of temperatures. We cover rainforest conservation and pollution and we do lots of other topics which build up to that.”

Lawthorn Primary is one of many schools across Scotland trying to make a difference, and teaching the next generation about how and why we should look after the world. The Scottish government encourages this work, and it fits in well with its overall environmental strategy. It has pledged to create all of Scotland's electricity from green energy by 2020, to reduce greenhouse gasses by 42 per cent by 2020, and, in response to the UN Decade of ESD, promised that by 2014 people in Scotland will have developed the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to live sustainable lives.

But this action is necessary. While net greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland have reduced by 27.6 per cent since 1990, in 2009 Scottish emissions were equivalent to 51 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, and each person in Scotland still contributes twice the global average in emissions.

Annual rainfall in Scotland increased by 21 per cent between 1961 and 2004. Conversely there has been a 25 per cent reduction in winter days with snow cover, with the snow season now shorter, starting later and finishing earlier in the year. This of course is worrying for the once thriving skiing industry in Scotland but also for what it signifies about climate change.

Having access to the material from organisations such as UNESCO, the World Wildlife Fund, and Eco-Schools Scotland, has provided teachers and pupils with a wealth of information to choose from, and has allowed them to improve their learning.

The school say that the UNESCO website has been a huge help, providing resources and giving suggestions which have sparked the children's imagination and encouraged them to conduct their own research online. Several speakers have visited the school, from UNESCO and other organisations. As Ms Milne says, “It allows the children to do research, to see where they all fit in to the world, and to bring all the information together.”

It is evident that the children are enthusiastic about making a difference to the environment and Ms Milne describes the learning as being pupil powered, with pupils taking charge and evaluating for themselves.

If anyone should doubt the impact this has on the wider community Ms Milne tells the story of being told that sanitation department workers instantly know when the school has done a focus on recycling, and can tell which streets have children from the school as recycling uptake was better on those streets.

“There is only one world we live in” she says. “We need to take care of it. We want to leave the world in a better place than when we got it.”

Further information:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/schoolsglobalfootprint

UNESCO as the lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

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