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ResourceSmart Schools Research Project – Executive Summary

Report commissioned by Sustainability Victoria

Mark Rickinson, Matt Hall, Alan Reid

Monash University

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For further details about the ResourceSmart Schools Research Project, see:

Rickinson, M., Hall, M. and Reid, A. (2014) *ResourceSmart Schools Research Project Final Report*. **Sustainability Victoria: Melbourne.**

Executive Summary

This document is a summary of research into the impacts and effectiveness of the ResourceSmart Schools (RSS) program in Victoria, Australia. The findings are based on state-wide survey responses from staff in 160 program schools, interviews with staff in 30 schools (25 program schools and 5 non-program schools), and analysis of relevant documentary evidence and wider research, during 2014.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of respondents (81%) indicated that the RSS program had improved their school's sustainability activities, and positive impacts could be seen in campus improvement, curriculum development, culture change, and community building.

- The influence of the RSS program plays out differently in individual schools but typically involves five main contributions to school sustainability: structured frameworks; supportive facilitation; internal monitoring; external validation; and local networks.

- Respondents were largely positive about the effectiveness of the RSS program, but flagged up challenges with: administration demands; reduced facilitator support; insufficient focus on learning and teaching; limited applicability of awards; and primary school emphasis.

- With these in mind, future improvement were recommended around: alleviating program administration; enhancing program facilitation; strengthening curriculum embedding; extending school-community links; meeting specific school needs; and emphasising leadership.

Recommendations

Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisation should:

1. Be confident in the value of the RSS program for promoting and supporting school sustainability activities, and continue to implement and grow the program in Victoria

2. Place learning, teaching and curriculum, at the centre of the next phase of development of RSS

3. Recognise the critical contribution that program facilitators have made thus far and find ways to strengthen their role in the future

4. Critically review all RSS program communications with the aim of improving their accessibility and usefulness to schools

5. Establish a Working Group to examine the sustainability trajectories of schools within the RSS program

6. Establish a Strategic Research Group to enable a more coordinated approach to future research, evaluation and evidence use on RSS.

Key Findings

Program Impacts

1. Survey respondents indicated that the program had improved their school's sustainability activities. Such improvements, reported for 81% of schools, could be seen across all four of the following sustainability dimensions: campus improvements, curriculum development, culture change, and community building. In terms of **campus improvements**, survey responses highlighted significant or moderate enhancements in the areas of waste management (72%), biodiversity (63%), water use (61%), and energy use (55%). The majority of schools have also made significant or moderate progress with the auditing (60%) and monitoring (55%) required to drive these enhancements.

2. In relation to the **curriculum**, survey findings suggest two thirds of schools can report significant or moderate level of progress with embedding sustainability content into the curriculum (69%), providing more sustainability learning opportunities (57%) and improving student learning outcomes relating to sustainability (62%). These developments include work to increase student involvement and leadership around sustainability actions within the school. However, for some schools, including ones that had seen considerable progress in other areas such as campus and culture, the program's influence on curriculum has become limited in scope and reach.

3. Staff interviewees in participating schools talked a lot about the **cultural changes** with regards to sustainability that had taken place in their schools since joining the program. Examples touched on key aspects of staff getting on board, leadership seeing its importance, coordinators getting protected time, students becoming major drivers, and school strategic documents being developed around sustainability. Similarly, survey responses showed significant or moderate progress with raising staff awareness (73%), embedding sustainability in decision-making (63%), and developing whole-school community involvement (59%).

4. In terms of **community building**, staff in participating schools repeatedly highlighted how the program had helped them to build connections and links with their wider community. There were various examples of program schools: forging new links with local sustainability groups and initiatives, acting as sustainability mentors for other schools, stimulating greater involvement from parents around sustainability and learning about the role of students as positive influences on sustainability practices at home.

5. Looking at **patterns of impact** across schools within the program, it is clear that program impacts vary with:

    a. school type – primary schools have made greater progress than secondary schools across all aspects of campus, curriculum, culture and community

    b. time in program – schools that have been in the program for more than 4 years had by far the highest reported levels of significant progress towards their sustainability goals as

compared with those that had been in the program for less than 6 months or between 6 months and 1 year.

Program Influence

6. Responses to the survey attribute **high levels of influence** on school's sustainability activities to program facilitators (78% strong/moderate influence), framework/modules (74%) and resource experts (63%). Also important were the program online data system (57%), star level system (56%) and networks (53%). Less influential overall were program newsletter (46%), awards (40%) and energy efficiency grants (36%).

7. The interview data reflect these findings and flag up **five key ways in which the program contributed to sustainability activities** within program schools. These highlight the value of the program's:

    a. *structured frameworks* that help direct and consolidate schools' sustainability activities

    b. *supportive facilitation* that helps schools to understand how to develop and deepen their work

    c. *internal monitoring* that helps with demonstrating progress and motivating others

    d. *external validation* that helps with internal buy in and external profile

    e. *local networks* that enables schools to forge stronger links with local organisations and schools.

    Each of these dimensions can be seen to be helping schools to make progress with a particular question relating to school sustainability i.e. *What to do?* (structured frameworks), *How to do it?* (supportive facilitation), *How are we doing?* (internal monitoring), *Why is this important?* (external verification) and *Who else can help?* (local networks).

8. It was also clear, however, that these program **influences play out differently within individual schools**. Structured frameworks, for example, have less influence in schools where their level of detail is seen as overwhelming, prescriptive or unachievable. Supportive, hands-on facilitation have less influence in schools where it is seen as simply keeping schools on track with program accreditation. Internal monitoring has less influence in schools where data are not seen as a priority or the data entry process is felt to be too time consuming. While external validation has less influence in schools where achieving stars or wining awards are not seen as key drivers or realistic possibilities.

9. The **influence of the program relative to other factors is complex**. On the one hand, many schools indicate that the program has 'improved school sustainability' (81%), 'kickstarted sustainability activities' (68%) and had 'significant traction' (64%). On the other, many schools were 'doing sustainability activities before joining RSS' (63%) and a significant proportion 'would have implemented sustainability activities regardless of joining RSS' (43%). The staff interviews, however, make clear that the sustainability activities that schools were doing before joining the

program were limited in scope and structure, and the influence of the program has been to develop, deepen and speed up these early developments. They also highlight that the program has been one of several 'within and beyond' school influences that have helped schools to extend and deepen their sustainability efforts.

Program Challenges and Future Improvements

10. Staff in participating schools were largely positive about the effectiveness of the program. They voiced strong support for its future continuation, making clear that the effects of any cessation of the program would be negative and significant for the motivation for and provision of most schools' sustainability activities. However, experiences in schools of the ResourceSmart program have been far from plain sailing in every instance. Staff respondents typically flagged up five **main challenges associated with the program**:

    a. **overwhelming demands on schools** – school coordinators struggling with the workload demands associated with program administration, data tracking and accreditation

    b. **reduced support from facilitators** – reports of facilitators becoming too thinly spread across schools and so less able to provide in-depth, face-to-face support and advice

    c. **insufficient emphasis on learning and teaching** – a sense that the curriculum/educational dimensions of the program could be strengthened

    d. **limited applicability of awards** – some staff questioning whether the current awards are really relevant to all schools within the program

    e. **primary school focus** – one secondary school coordinator finding the program to be primary school orientated and a bit prescriptive.

11. As well as highlighting challenges associated with the program, staff in participating schools also proposed six **areas for future improvement**:

    a. **alleviating program administration** – by simplifying reporting requirements and encouraging release time for coordinators

    b. **enhancing program facilitation** – by increasing face-to-face facilitation and providing more program resources

    c. **strengthening curriculum embedding** – by emphasising learning and teaching, developing curriculum resources and providing staff professional development

    d. **extending school-community links** – by enabling connections with school clusters, parents/families and local companies

    e. **meeting specific school needs** – by developing tailored support for secondary schools and ongoing challenges for five star schools

    f. **emphasising leadership** – by targeting communication with school leaders.

Recommendations

1. **Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations should be confident in the value of the ResourceSmart School program and should continue to implement and grow the program in Victoria**.

   This research (and previous evaluations) shows that ResourceSmart Schools is helping schools, at different stages in the sustainability journey, to develop more sustainable resource use, curriculum practices, whole-school decision-making and community links.

   The value of the program lies in its blending of structured frameworks, supportive facilitation, internal monitoring, external validation, and local networks.

   There is potential, though, to do more both with existing program schools (e.g. strengthening of curriculum embedding) and with schools beyond the program (e.g. increased involvement of secondary schools). As a mature program that is valued by staff in participating schools and that includes many of the good practice features of similar programs internationally, ResourceSmart Schools is ripe for continued support and future development.

2. **Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations should place learning and teaching and curriculum at the centre of the next phase of development of ResourceSmart Schools.**

   While curriculum embedding is part of the current program, staff in participating schools were very clear that more could be made of the learning and teaching dimensions of ResourceSmart Schools. This means working from the starting point that sustainability is essentially 'a learning process' (Scott and Gough, 2003c: xiv) and therefore all aspects of the program need to embrace and realise their learning and teaching opportunities.

   Consequently:

   - program facilitators, need to embody and exhibit educational expertise as much as sustainability know-how,
   - program monitoring needs to focus on learning outcomes as much as resource use outcomes,
   - program frameworks need to emphasise the quality of student/staff/family learning as much as the extent of progress with module actions, and
   - program resources need to provide ideas for varied curriculum areas as well as different aspects of school sustainability.

   In short, the ResourceSmart program needs to better help schools to explore the connections (*how is education part of the solution?*) and disconnections (*how is education part of the problem?*) between education and sustainability.

3. **Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations must recognise the critical contribution that program facilitators have made thus far, and find ways to strengthen their role in the future.**

High quality, hands-on advice and support from enthusiastic, knowledgeable facilitators, who are responsive to schools' individual needs, are the key aspects and features of RSS that move schools from ideas to actions, from isolated activities to strategic approaches, from individual enthusiasts to whole-staff involvement, from superficial concerns to deeper questions, and so on.

But as the program grows there is a risk that contact with facilitators will decrease and/or become more focused on program administration as opposed to individual school development.

It is therefore crucial that Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations find ways to maximise the added value of facilitators through, for example:

- prioritising facilitator funding throughout program budgetary considerations;
- ensuring that all facilitators bring both sustainability and educational expertise; and
- assuring that all facilitators are locally accessible by schools.

4. **Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations should critically review all program communications with the aim of improving their accessibility and usefulness to schools.**

At present, staff in participating schools tend to rely on facilitators primarily, to help them make sense of program requirements. There is also concern amongst staff in some schools that the demands of the program seem overwhelming. There is, therefore, a strong argument for reviewing and improving the ways in which ResourceSmart Schools is presented and communicated to participants.

Priorities for consideration include ways to make:

- the language more user-orientated as opposed to administrator-orientated;
- the actions more process-based as opposed to list-based; and
- the communications more audience-specific (e.g. for principals, for parents, for curriculum leads and so on) as opposed to generic.

The underlying point here is that modest investment in improving the program's communications will pay real dividends in terms of making the program more appealing to new schools, more understandable to existing schools, and less dependent on facilitators to translate and interpret what is perceived to be, and/or actually, required.

5. **Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations should establish a Working Group to examine the sustainability trajectories of schools within the program.**

   While the program's star level system clearly acknowledges that schools can have different sustainability starting points and end points, this research suggests that more could be made of different schools' sustainability journeys (see Model in Appendix 2).

   Improved understanding of how different types of schools progress through the program and what helps them to maintain momentum at different stages in the process, could help to improve the future effectiveness of many aspects of the program.

   Program communications could be better targeted around key drivers for different kinds of schools, program facilitation and frameworks could be better structured around possible trajectories and likely needs, and program networks could be more explicitly focused on creating links between schools at similar and/or different stages in the journey.

   Furthermore, any future expansion of the program, particularly amongst secondary schools, could be seen as an opportunity to test and refine what it currently known about the trajectories of schools within the program.

6. **Sustainability Victoria and its partner organisations should establish a Strategic Research Group to enable a more coordinated approach to future research, evaluation and evidence use on ResourceSmart Schools.**

   The collection and analysis of school- and program-level data is a key strength of the ResourceSmart Schools program. So too is Sustainability Victoria's investment in research and evaluation at regular intervals during the early piloting and later development of the ResourceSmart program.

   Looking forwards, through, there are opportunities for a more coordinated approach to evidence generation and application about the program. In particular, it is important that future research and evaluation builds on the findings of previous projects, focuses on issues of strategic importance to the program (such as the role of facilitators or the enhancement of sustainability learning), and makes concerted efforts to engage relevant stakeholders at all stages in the process.

   To foster the development of these kinds of approaches, Sustainability Victoria should establish a 'ResourceSmart Schools Strategic Research Group' for practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and others interested in developing more coordinated approaches to research, evaluation and use of evidence around sustainable schools.