



Youth Environment Council of South Australia

July 2011 Report

Background

The Youth Environment Council of South Australia (YEC) is inspiring a new generation of students to take action for the environment.

Since 1997, the YEC has provided young people a voice in key environmental issues facing South Australia and has given them opportunities to take action to achieve a more environmentally sustainable future for South Australia.

In 2009 the Environmental Education Unit of the Department for Environment and Heritage's closed and the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board (AMLR NRM Board) assumed responsibility for the YEC as a good fit with their Youth Voice Program and commitment to AUSSI-SA, the SA Sustainable Schools program.

A steering committee consisting of NRM Education Staff and DECS are responsible for the organisation and delivery of YEC activities. All forums, activities and travel costs of the YEC are funded by DECS.

New approach

Due to changes in capacity as well as a shared delivery across a number of NRM Boards, the YEC model has moved to align very closely with the NRM Education 'Youth Action Approach'. This is a student-led process in which students drive the action by; learning about environmental themes (i.e. energy, water, waste, biodiversity, air quality and transport), identifying school needs, planning for improvement, carrying out actions and evaluating outcomes.

As part of the 'Youth Action Approach', selected students attend Youth Environment Forums (YEF) every Term. Students involved in YEF can nominate to be a part of the State-wide YEC and represent their regional Youth Environment Forum Clusters. Two students from each forum are selected to join the YEC and it is their responsibility to take their new skills and knowledge back to their schools and clusters each term. This new structure places the emphasis back with the school community and allows NRM Education staff to mentor groups to build leadership skills and capacity whilst tackling local environmental concerns.

YEC schools and events

In 2011 there are 50 Year 5-11 students from 40 public and private schools throughout the State involved in the YEC. These students are as wide spread as Kangaroo Island, Mt Gambier, Waikerie, Murray Bridge, Victor Harbor and Yorke Peninsula. There are also a number of schools from Metropolitan Adelaide involved.

The YEC provides opportunities for these students to come together and share their passion for the environment. In Term 1 of 2011, students met for a two day leadership and training camp at Arbury Park Outdoor School and will reconvene in Term 3 for a sharing and sustainability forum.

The camps and forums enable students to lead change in their school, home and community. Students are supported to become actively involved in decision making, planning, taking action within the school and local community whilst achieving environmental and educational outcomes.

Workshop topics include leadership, spheres of influence, fundraising, promotion and project management. A major component of each forum allows students to share their regional environmental projects with each other. This helps identify common themes across the State and provides an opportunity for students to share new ideas and discuss strategies to overcome challenges. The YEC also provides students with inspiration about different pathways into the environmental field.

The use of online technologies such as Centra have been utilised to assist in bringing the YEC members into contact with each other throughout the year and to reduce travel costs and the carbon footprint.

Youth Voice and Curriculum links

Promoting and encouraging youth voice is a significant part of the YEC's work. Youth Voice fits in with a core value of AuSSI-SA that young people are partners and active participants in making the decisions that affect their lives.

Youth Voice also fits in closely with the cross-curriculum priority of sustainability in the new Australian Curriculum. It develops the knowledge, skills and values necessary for people to act in ways that contribute to more sustainable patterns of living. Education for sustainability is futures-oriented, focusing on protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and socially just world through action that recognises the relevance and interdependence of environmental, social, cultural and economic considerations.

The YEC also contributes to the development of a number of general capabilities outlined in the Australian Curriculum, in particular, critical and creative thinking, personal and social competence and ethical behaviour.

YEC Executive Group

With Youth Voice being such a significant part of the YEC, the students peer-elect six members to join the YEC Executive Group. This group has the responsibility to provide a youth perspective to the SA Government on key environmental sustainability issues facing South Australia.

They will meet with the Minister later in the year to discuss topics that students across the state are concerned about and are taking action on. This group's role will also be to lead activities at future YEC events.

Resources

The YEC steering committee have developed a number of new resources over the past two years to help young people take environmental action.

These include:

- *Create a Voice: Your Voice, Our Voice, Youth Voice* - a student guide to starting and maintaining a youth environment group and taking action in school
- Youth environmental project management information such as planning, fundraising, promoting and resources available
- Leadership simulation activities
- Information about Spheres of Influence
- Tips and Tricks for successful mentoring of students in environmental action

These resources along with photos, stories and information is available at the YEC website:

www.yecsa.net.au

Benefits

Through being a part of the YEC, students develop skills in communication, leadership, problem solving, project management, decision-making and team work.

The YEC is having a profound ripple effect across SA as each of the 50 YEC students is representing their regional Youth Environment Cluster. A survey conducted of NRM Education Coordinators indicated there are a total of 125 schools involved in these clusters. The evaluation from the Arbury Park Leadership camp showed that 96% of students 'feel confident to take the new information and skills gained back to their region.'

An example is a student from Grange Primary School who attended a YEC Forum and left feeling inspired, "*never give up, you can do at least one little thing to make a difference*" was the message they left with. Another student discovered that "*learning is not just about listening it's about doing*". The students decided to put their new skills into action and are planning a new school sustainability garden to showcase to the local community. Students also reported they would hold a "Green Day" to raise environmental awareness throughout the school.

The school and local community will also benefit from students' active participation in moving towards sustainable lifestyles. As well as environmental improvement, the school and community gain young people equipped with skills, dispositions and knowledge to create change. As engaged and active citizens, they are a positive force for the community in which they live, educating and empowering others.

Future direction

Through evaluation of students, teachers, mentors and the steering committee, the YEC is proving to be a successful model.

DECS and the AMLR NRMB also continues to recognise the value of instilling a greater understanding of environmental issues in the minds of young people and providing them with the skills to take action for the environment.

With the introduction of the new Australian Curriculum, there are exciting opportunities to embed the YEC into a State-wide approach to Youth Voice and sustainability for Education.

YEC students will not only become the next generation of leaders and managers but will also be equipped to tackle environmental challenges today.

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