

# A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

## Mumbulla School for Rudolf Steiner Education



Located on Djiringanj Country in Bega, Mumbulla School for Rudolf Steiner Education is an independent, co-educational, non-denominational school with about 180 students, with single stream classes for students K-6.

Students have the same teacher from Grades 1 – 6, an approach consistent across Steiner schools, which supports a long-connection to families as well as children. This approach is also supportive of a culture of sustainability, as students build habits together from an early age that continue throughout their schooling.

Mumbulla School was awarded as the 2024 Sustainable School of the Year, for its holistic approach to sustainability across school culture, curriculum and campus. This case studies explores some of these strategies and outcomes.

### A SCHOOL CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability has long been a part of the Mumbulla school ethos and has continued to evolve over time. As priorities within society have changed and sustainability has become more embedded in the curriculum, the school culture has adapted to incorporate a more complex understanding of sustainability issues.

Environment, sustainability and waste management are important to staff and the school Executive. Staff are important drivers for environmental messages and provide regular reminders about 'what's in the bin, is it the right bin, where should it go'. This regular education and reminders are important, for both staff, students and sometimes parents. The school's Education Manager, Reagan White, suggests that part of the process is accepting that it is not always going to be perfect. 'People will still put things in the worm farms that don't necessarily belong, but it's important not to get cranky about it, it's about finding the right balance – we just pull out the rubbish and talk about where it should go - it's a moment to educate'.

There is strong commitment to environmental sustainability from the leadership team, who actively promotes sustainability initiatives and fosters a culture of environmental awareness among staff and students.

### AT A GLANCE

- K-6 single stream, 180 students
- Learning is regularly taken outside, fostering connection to place and stewardship
- Comprehensive waste management systems and thriving kitchen garden
- Strong commitment to sustainability from teachers and school leadership
- Opportunities for professional development
- NSW Sustainable School of the Year 2024.



Staff are attending environmental education conferences and have opportunities for ongoing in-school professional development. Most recently, staff have been working with Kate Flood, author of The Compost Coach (and parent volunteer) who ran a workshop for staff on healthy composting. Collaborative team training ensures a cohesive approach across all classrooms, with simple things like reminders at staff meetings, sharing experiences, and occasional composting check in, 'how is your compost looking...what is working in your classroom?'. The team also take the approach of doing things 'bit by bit' and 'celebrating the little wins, rather than trying to do a whole lot of things at once'.

The school has an annual professional learning focus, which becomes a driving force behind the whole school. They have had a focus on Indigenous education, and also sustainability, and this longer-term focus enables teachers to further explore opportunities to embed sustainability in the school culture and curriculum. Once initiatives are embedded, they have a longevity to them, and teachers will put them into the curriculum in places where they may not have previously thought they could go.

## EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

At Mumbulla School, sustainability is integrated across the curriculum, with students engaging in environmental topics at every stage of their learning. Each grade explores age-appropriate content, beginning with local environmental studies and gradually expanding to global issues such as Eden Whaling and weather systems. The school emphasises practical activities that nurture a connection to nature, fostering environmental stewardship and responsibility for the Earth.

Central to their curriculum, is the thriving school kitchen garden. The garden provides opportunities for hands-on lessons on plant biology, ecosystems, and sustainable food sources. The garden includes a vegetable garden, Indigenous food garden, chickens, and a kitchen/garden program.

Class 3 is responsible for looking after the chickens, and this learning carries on through the rest of the students' schooling. Children develop an understand of the chickens and their needs. The chickens also provide fresh eggs for class baking, integrating practical life skills with sustainability. During school holidays, chickens are cared for by families, who take them home.

Classes 3 and 4 participate in gardening lessons, learning sustainable practices and the joy of nurturing plants. The vegetable garden teaches students how to grow and care for plants, fostering a connection to the food they eat.

Composting and worm farming are part of the school garden, as well as school waste management system. Students care for worm farms and learn about composting's role in soil health and ecosystems. Thriving worm farms help process organic waste, producing nutrient-rich compost for the gardens while fostering hands-on learning about soil health.





Having a kitchen garden does involve collaborative effort from teachers and students and is supported by volunteer parents. It also involves accepting imperfections, 'there may be weeds, the garden won't always be beautiful', but it is important to be adaptable and open to challenges as they occur.

Learning outside is an integral part of Mumbulla School's values and pedagogy, 'we value the outdoor environment as much as we value the indoor environment'. Lessons regularly take place outdoors, fostering ecological understanding and stewardship. Classes visit local rivers, parks, and beaches for field trips. Students participate in tree planting, bug surveys, habitat box making, and community activities such as and climate rallies/strikes and Clean Up Australia Day.

Students learn in nature as well as about nature. Mumbulla School sits near Mumbulla Mountain, surrounded by green spaces. The school community strives to make the learning environment as lovely as possible, "the beauty of learning should be reflected in the beauty of the world around us..The campus is not new,flashy, or fancy, but it is well cared for and thoughtfully nurtured.



Students are encouraged to be critical thinkers and active learners. Student-led environmental committees advocate for sustainable practices within the school, empowering them to take ownership of their learning environment. Class 5 & 6 students, the Planet Protectors, worked with Bournda Environmental Education Centre to create a school waste action plan. Students conducted a waste audit and created action plans to improve signage and create games to educate younger students to reduce contamination and ensure the small amount of waste they have is being correctly sorted by students.

Students integrate First Nations ways of knowing, learning about culture through song, dance, language, and art. The school has an active Reconciliation Action Plan and works in partnership with the local Djiringanj community whenever possible—for example, in the creation of the Indigenous food garden. As part of this, they welcomed visitors from Black Duck Foods in Mallacoota to share their knowledge about Indigenous food plants to help establish the garden.

## SCHOOL GROUNDS, OPERATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Mumbulla school has a comprehensive approach to waste management, including a focus on waste avoidance and circular economy. The comprehensive food and garden organics system

- Uneaten food is taken home by students and food waste composted.
- Every classroom has three bins: green for compost, yellow for recycling, and red for landfill.
- Each class manages a large compost bin they empty and care for.
- Bokashi composting is in place in kindergarten to manage citrus waste from fruit breaks and lunches, with plans to expand this system to all classes.
- Garden organics become 'brown carbon' for healthy compost, which is used in the kitchen garden.
- Compost and garden work is supported by a regular parent volunteer.





School administration and events are run with a 'low-waste lens' – they have a policy to minimise printing (storing documents electronically and requesting directors to use devices at meetings) and purchasing recycled paper. The school is transitioning to sustainable materials for craft, including growing grasses for weaving and natural dyes. The annual school spring fair supports re-use, encouraging people to BYO cups, and event waste management is overseen by a crew of volunteer parents.

The school generates solar power that feeds into the grid, promoting renewable energy and reducing their carbon footprint. They actively monitor their energy use and take steps to improve efficiency, such as encouraging shutting down computers, and managing heating and cooling responsibly. The school regularly celebrates its energy-saving efforts with the school community through the school bulletin, fostering awareness and sustainable practices.



The planning and design of the school grounds encourage a connection to nature and learning about biodiversity. Features such as a frog pond, native species plantings, and shade providing trees help support local ecosystems while also reducing heat in the playground.

School gardens are an integral part of both play and learning, incorporating Indigenous plants, informative signage, and productive gardens that supply fresh ingredients for the kitchen garden program.

## IT'S A JOURNEY

The school community has more plans to continue on their journey, and are looking forward to collaborating with local community groups, such as the Bega River & Wetlands Landcare Group (BRAWL), to develop the embankment along the lagoon of a newly acquired piece of land adjacent to the school. There are also plans to implement a school Return and Earn project, and they have just this year introduced some TerraCycle collection points in the school for both school and wider community use.

Reagan offers this advice to educators and school leaders looking to make their school more sustainable:

"Sustainability doesn't have to be hard or complicated or expensive - it's not because we're an independent school that this is working. It's not because we're putting a whole ton of money into it because we're not. We're just working at it - little bit by little bit."

"It's okay to start out small - if you believe in it, and it's something that's important to you, it can become contagious. When you've got something working in your classroom or school, people see it, they see that the children are engaged and you're engaged and excited, so they want to get involved too!"





*Thanks to Reagan White, Mumbulla School Education Manager & Mumbulla School for Steiner Education for sharing their story with Sustainable Schools NSW.*

*Mumbulla School was awarded the 2024 NSW Sustainable School of the Year.*

*Sustainable Schools NSW is an initiative of Environmental Education NSW, a not-for-profit professional association for environmental educators.*

## WHAT IS A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY?

### CULTURE OUTCOMES

- Sustainability is a core part of school leadership, planning, decision-making and resource allocation.
- Sustainability education professional development is included for teachers, school executive and staff.
- The school community engages in mutually beneficial partnerships and networks contributing to local, national and global sustainability initiatives.
- School sustainability outcomes are celebrated and shared within the school and wider community.

### CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Sustainability is a cross-curriculum priority.
- Learning is taken outside and builds a student's connection to place.
- Students are connected to Country and celebrate and share cultural knowledge.
- Student-centred learning approaches are used to support critical thinking and action-based learning for the environment.

### CAMPUS OUTCOMES

- Grounds and infrastructure design, planning and management enhance environmental and educational outcomes.
- Operations, grounds and infrastructure are monitored to establish and meet resource efficiency and sustainability targets
- Operations integrate the principals of Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD) and the Triple Bottom Line (TBL).