

The Wimmera Forum – *Leading the Way*

Summary



64 students from Melbourne and the Wimmera region joined together on 25-27 November at Longerenong College, outside of Horsham in western Victoria, for an inaugural three-day *Leading the Way* Forum. Many came not knowing what to expect or what was in store for them during this sustainability event. Yet all participants left with a deeper understanding of water issues facing the Wimmera region and a greater appreciation for those who manage their daily activities in these times of a changing climate. All students made a commitment to take personal action in their homes, schools and communities and many left with promises to stay in touch with new friends made during the Forum.

The Forum started with a range of team building activities and then students broke up into special interest groups to consider issues concerning the allocation of water from the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project. On the second day, eight local representatives gave a series of presentations to highlight different points of view and students travelled by coach to visit some local places of interest to see sustainability practices first hand. On the final day, students delivered group presentations and made commitments to personal action. One student astutely summed up the Forum as – “Collective passion for a sustainable future.”

But it was not all about research and study. A highlight of the forum was the bush dance held on the first night. Joy Forbes, a local bush dance caller and Principal of Goroke P-12, had all the students up dancing together and mixing with one another for a couple of hours. The students went to bed exhausted and woke the next day looking to build on their newly found friendships.

The organisers spent a great deal of time planning for this Forum and were thrilled with the results. The final student presentations were of a very high standard and not only showed a great understanding of water issues facing the region, but also gave the students an opportunity to showcase their communication skills to a large audience in a new setting.

The forum was independently evaluated by Dr Brian Sharpley. A summary of his report can be found on page 3 and his full report is available on the website. Based on the experiences of this forum, we will complete a manual for setting up TLfS Learning Networks and running forums.

This Forum was hosted by the Wimmera Southern Mallee Local Learning Employment Network and Local Community Partnership and was delivered by the Co-founders of the Tomorrow's Leaders for Sustainability program. The three-day event was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and was supported by a wide range of local community groups and organisations.

Some feedback from the teachers who attended and who assisted as Group mentors:

- *It would have taken us a term back at school to do what was done in the last few days.*
- *Thank you for bringing such an outstanding event to the Wimmera.*
- *Thanks so much again for the wonderful opportunity to attend the forum. I had a great time, learnt so much and really enjoyed the time away with my students during this very busy time of year.*
- *My year 9 students and I have had a great debrief today about last week. The students all loved the forum and were very positive about all aspects of it. They really enjoyed mixing with the Melbourne students. It was great to see their eyes opened to the fact that they are just normal kids like them.*
- *One student commented on how speaking to a big group like they did last week helped her feel much more confident about speaking in public or to a group.*
- *They LOVED the camp! Thanks so much for organising it!*
- *Well done. It was a huge success!*

Some feedback from some of the local presenters and leaders of the field trips:

- *Thanks for the opportunity to discuss the region with our next generation of young adults.*
- *Last week whilst visiting the West Wimmera Shire I was told by some proud parents how well the program had run and that their children now happily debated the water issues around their kitchen table.*
- *Well done to the organisers.*
- *From my limited exposure to the Forum, I was very impressed. The sessions I saw were well organised and the kids seemed really switched on. They definitely asked some really good questions that cut to (the) heart of matters. I would happily be involved again if this became a regular event.*

Tomorrow's Leaders for Sustainability evaluation report

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January 2010

1.0 Executive summary

This report documents the findings of an evaluation of two aspects of the **Tomorrow's Leaders for Sustainability (TLfS)** program implemented in the Wimmera region of Victoria: a student forum held during November, 2009, and a learning network model in local schools.

Although the forum is seen as an integral component of the TLfS program, only a few of the students who attended had completed the school based component of the program. In this report, then, the two activities – school based programs and the forum – are treated as related but independent events and the analysis is presented separately.

The Forum was conducted over 3 days and involved students working in teams to role play and learn about the region, especially the water distribution system. They had the opportunity to learn about the region through guest speakers and a field trip. On the final day, the teams presented their views on how the water saved by the new pipeline was to be distributed. They also participated in preparing a declaration and commitments to action.

The forum was a great success. One teacher believed that *"It would have taken us a term back at school to do what was done in the last few days."* Another added, *"And to a greater depth. I felt they learnt a lot."* The pre and post student tests supported these views and indicated student understanding of the Horsham region and the water distribution system in the region grew significantly during the forum. There was strong evidence that it was highly successful in fostering student leadership potential through the group activities and was effective in increasing the students' understanding of the key sustainability issues in the Wimmera. Locals talking about local issues, whether as guest speakers or as part of the field trips, were integral in personalising and humanising the students' learning experiences.

The TLfS program in schools offers teacher workshops and provides extensive course materials as teacher and student manuals. These include activities to support learning, projects and leadership in school programs. Sustainability youth forums are an important component in linking schools to community

groups. The conceptual model underpinning the program is based on the notion that young people are more interested in developing leadership within their groups than in individual leadership. The focus, then, is on students actively and successfully working in groups to achieve sustainability outcomes. Of the four schools that participated in the Wimmera workshops, two implemented programs during 2009. These two schools illustrate the flexibility of the program. At Goroke P-12 College, the program developed as a whole-school scientific project that is ongoing and long term, while at Horsham SC it took the shape of shorter, enterprise projects.

An important component of the program is to link schools with community groups to support student activities. Teachers from Goroke P-12 school were introduced, through the TLfS program, to Adam Blake from the Trust for Nature and this led directly to their ongoing research project. Other community members were effectively used as speakers at the forum. The TLfS program also led to increased student involvement in the community. At Goroke P-12, the students are actively participating with naturalists in a land restoration program, while at Horsham SC the students have actively sought out people in the community to work with them in completing their projects.

TLfS is in the early stages and is still emerging as an accepted educational program, and it faces the difficulty of breaking into an already crowded curriculum. Importantly, the workshops for teachers and local community educators play an important and vital role in its promotion and implementation into schools.

This evaluation was limited and was unable to determine the extent to which the program is influencing students' attitudes towards sustainability. There was good evidence, however, that the students were successfully learning and establishing community-based action through the group projects.

A full report of this evaluation report can be found on the TLfS website:

www.leadersfor sustainability.com