



How green is our school?

David Willows thinks through the challenge of environmental impact

The International School of Brussels (ISB) is the first school to become a Campaign Associate in a European Union campaign to change the landscape of energy. But this is just one part of the school's journey towards understanding its environmental vision.

There's a question out there that I keep stumbling across: are kids learning the right 'stuff'? There might be better ways of asking the question, but even here the modern pedagogical challenge is clear: to what extent are we truly preparing children for a world that is quite significantly different from the world in which we ourselves grew up?

Let's start with climate change. Ten years ago, most of us had not heard of it. Five years ago, it was a topic of conversation that only caused a few to sit up and take notice. Today ... well, it goes without saying. It is impossible to get through a day without being reminded of the detrimental effects of our actions upon the environment.

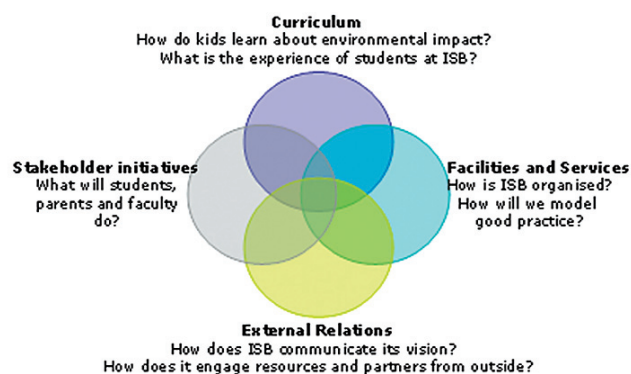
And so schools have begun to change – and there are some outstanding examples out there of what can be done to help children of all ages grow in understanding and believe that they can truly make a difference. The International School of Brussels (ISB) has certainly begun to change too. We would never be as bold as to claim that we have already found the answers, but we believe that we have at least come some way in understanding the complexity of the task and mapping out a clear future direction.

Set in an idyllic campus, surrounded by the famous Forêt de Soignes, ISB has always been reminded of the importance of helping students understand their relationship to their environment. Children learning in the forest, initiatives by students and teachers for better recycling, working with the local Commune and Brussels Region has therefore been commonplace. ISB was even the first school in Belgium to be awarded an 'Eco' Star by the Brussels Institute for Management of the Environment (IBGE).

The problem was that we did not have a school-wide plan that ensured both that people (students, parents, faculty...) knew about what we were doing – and that we understood where we needed to go next. Today, ISB has a plan for the future: ISB 2010, setting out the vision and priority agendas that will drive the development of the school over the next few years. Central to the plan is an ambitious environmental agenda, commonly known as ISBEarth. Our stated aim is to be:

A school in which all individuals understand that international citizenship includes taking real responsibility for finite, shared resources.

Figure 1: The overlapping questions that drive ISB Earth.



The project itself recognises a series of interconnected questions, as outlined in figure 1, that bring into sharp relief the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead of us. But let's imagine for a moment a school in which what is taught in the classroom is modelled by the way we organise ourselves, is supported by a range of community stakeholders, is effectively communicated and even resourced by external 'Partners' who also share our vision. ISBEarth is all about trying to make a particular dream a reality.

But how will it happen? In understanding the way ahead, we have found ourselves often turning to Michael Fullan's recent remarks on sustainable leadership, which, he explains, *absolutely* requires top-down, bottom-up and 'sideways' support of your school's goals and objectives.¹

In practice, this means total board-level and leadership commitment to an ambitious environmental agenda; support from key stakeholder groups such as the school's Environmental Committee which has long campaigned for more environmentally-friendly practices in the classrooms and across the campus; plus the realisation that we simply will not achieve what we want to achieve without actively 'building lateral capacity' with other schools, organisations and networks that share our values and mission.

Believe me; it's not just about the money. What we are beginning to discover at ISB is that a school as complex and ambitious as this cannot achieve its goals without the development of partnerships that will give entry into new worlds of understanding, knowledge, insight and perspectives. A recent partnership with the Directorate General for Energy and Transport of the European Commission illustrates the point.

In 2005, the European Union launched a major campaign, Sustainable Energy Europe², designed to raise awareness and change the landscape of energy both in terms of sustainable energy production and energy efficiency. In acknowledgement of the work that it was doing in this area, as well as its capacity to model good practice to other schools, ISB was invited by the Commission to become the first school Campaign Associate.

This formal acknowledgment was, of course, welcomed by the school in that it gave increased visibility, but also had another, unexpected and immediate impact. It was as if the acknowledgement itself challenged us to go further than we had gone before ... a self-fulfilling prophesy was at work!

One of the most tangible expressions of this partnership was an environmental and energy day, set in the context of the European Sustainable Energy Week 2007. Entitled *Reducing our impact*, the day consisted of a series of plenary sessions and hands-on activities, each designed to help students realise how they can respond to today's global energy and environment issues and mitigate their environmental footprint.

In total, the event involved more than 400 high school students and faculty members as well as a number of external experts on the subjects of environmental impact and sustainable development. European Commission representatives were present, as well as other key external stakeholders from Exxon Mobil, WWF, Unilever, Toyota and the Brussels Institute for the Management of the Environment.

Continued overleaf →

