



PALUMA ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTRE

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PRINCIPAL'S FOREWORD

Introduction

This year saw the end of our three-year planning and review cycle and the completion of our Triennial School Review (TSR). Like staff at other small schools, we groaned about the addition of seemingly more paperwork and went into the process with less enthusiasm than perhaps we should have. However, we did receive valuable support from our district Community Participation Officer, who had some useful ideas for collecting data in our setting. We were confident that we provide a valuable service to schools and the data collected as part of the TSR validated that. We love what we do but would always like to do it better. The School Strategic Plan drawn up at the end of the TSR process gives us some clear ways forward.

Highlights

- Working with TSR "focus groups" of both teachers and students who had visited Paluma and collecting their feedback - on our curriculum programs, how we deliver them, the support we provide to schools, even our facilities. We've never had the opportunity to "interview" and survey teachers and students in a structured way before, and their feedback both affirmed the good things we do, and gave us some direction for the future.
- Hosting an increased number of small schools with multiage classes. Delivering our environmental message in the rainforest to students of varying ages was a welcome challenge to our pedagogy.

Key Outcomes and Goals achieved

- Safely delivered to our visiting schools best practice curriculum, teaching and learning in the natural environment of the rainforests of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.
- Participated in forums organized by the Outdoor and Environmental Education Centres Principals Alliance (OEECPA) that developed statewide strategies for environmentally sustainable schools.
- Continued development and resourcing of new learning activities.
- Amended our menus to meet *Smart Choices Food and Drink Supply Strategy* standards from the beginning of 2006.
- Administered and maintained our two sites efficiently. We have limited funds, yet both sites are well-maintained and administrative systems work well. This reflects the commitment of all staff.

Future outlook

Our long-term goal is to increase the capacity of the centre, both in facilities and teaching staff, to lift the percentage of the Townsville District student population visiting Paluma from the current five year average of less than 5% to something closer to 10%. We are part way through the UNESCO Decade of Environmental Education and the Commonwealth government released its *National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools* late in 2005. If we are to assist schools move towards the principles of environmentally sustainable development, we need to deliver our message to a bigger group of students. Although the centre's programs are almost all delivered in the natural environment, the lack of any general learning area limits both the number of groups we can host and the types of activities we can offer. Insufficient undercover space also has health and safety considerations, especially in cold and wet weather. In 2007, we hope to further develop some strategies that will allow us to deliver our message to a larger cohort of students, in greater comfort.

OUR SCHOOL AT A GLANCE

Centre Profile

The Paluma Environmental Education Centre is part of the small but diverse sector of 25 outdoor and environmental education centres (O&EECs) run by Education Queensland. The profile of outdoor and environmental education within Education Queensland is not high. Lifting the profile of our centres and the work we do in delivering core student learning outcomes remains a priority of the Outdoor and Environmental Education Centres Principals Alliance (OEECPA), to which Paluma EEC belongs.

The only other environmental education centre located near Townsville is the Gumburu Catholic Environmental Education Centre run by the Townsville Catholic Diocese, coincidentally also located in Paluma. Gumburu opened in 1993 following a 1983 decision by the Department of Education (now Education Queensland) to restrict access to Paluma EEC to state schools. Cooperation between the two centres continues, with joint development of curriculum programs and sharing of resources. The centres developed protocols for the management of shared learning areas like the Wet Creek. In 2007, we plan joint development of a community recycling centre and indigenous food trail.

The Paluma EEC is located in the Townsville District, part of Education Queensland's Northern Region. Opening in 1997 as the Paluma Field Study Centre, the centre has provided learning experiences within the rainforest environment to the schools of Townsville and neighbouring districts for nearly thirty years. Paluma EEC is a split-campus facility, with the operational part (school excursions) located in Paluma on the site of the former Paluma State School. Most administrative tasks are carried out at an office in Townsville (located in Block L of the Vincent State School campus), owing to the lack of an administrative space at Paluma.

As an Environmental Education Centre, we have no enrolment of our own. This is a distinct disadvantage when attempting to access sources of additional funding, even within Education Queensland. However, this centre caters for approximately 1500 individual students annually. Our students are mostly drawn from Townsville District primary schools (nearly 90% of total visitation). In the provision of our residential programs, approximately 2400 students-nights accommodation is provided annually. Visits by special education classes are limited. We encourage schools to make our services available to as many of their students as possible, so during the planning phases, we work with teachers on individualizing our curriculum program to suit special needs students.

Secondary school students form a small percentage of our total visitation (70.0% in 2006, 8.8% in 2005 after a peak of 11.8% in 2004). We try to make our curriculum programs more accessible to secondary students by offering them as day trip excursions. Given the difficulties secondary groups appear to face in releasing teachers from timetables, the reduction in secondary visitations and the trend towards secondary day excursions are likely to continue.

Curriculum offerings

- Paluma EEC offers cross-curricula excursion programs based on core content within three focus Key Learning Areas - Studies of Society and Environment, Science and Health and Physical Education. All learning activities are aligned to core learning outcomes in the QSA syllabus documents, with nearly all learning experiences clustered around Levels 3 and 4 (80% of total visitation).
- The roll-out of the Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework (QCAR) over the next two years will be monitored closely for implications for the centre, as will any moves within Education Queensland towards a greater focus on sustainability.
- The age range of classes once drawn exclusively from upper primary now regularly includes students from Years 3, 4 and 5 as well. Since 2000, Years 4&5 has been the largest student cohort visiting the centre. This cohort in 2006 constituted 51.6%, up 5% on 2005.
- The younger age of visiting students has implications for program development, the way we teach, the facilities we provide, and the level of adult supervision required to adequately risk manage students both living and working in the natural environment in a semi-remote location. Additional programs have been developed to cater for this changed demographic.
- Classes usually attend excursions of from one to four days in length, with three days/ two nights being the most common format. With increased visitation by younger classes, two day/ overnight excursions are now more common.
- The Years 6&7 cohort in 2006 was 28.4% of total visitations, the lowest ever. Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers of older students are looking more for "adventure" type activities, while PEEC provides learning activities more closely aligned to the syllabus.

- Five “small schools” visited in 2006 (7.2% of total visitation). Classes from small schools and Years 3 to 5 bring smaller class sizes, bringing the average primary class size down to 23.8 in 2006.
- One school brought three classes on a day trip, 5.8% of total visitations. For the visiting students, this can eliminate the cost of catering, but is less than ideal as a learning opportunity.
- Visits by all primary school students made up 93% of total visitations in 2006. Secondary students constituted only 7% of total visitations in 2006. This affirms the primary school focus of the centre.
- Learning experiences for secondary school groups are tied to one Key Learning Area, or subject area within a Key Learning Area. This may change in the future as the secondary sector moves to cross-curricula outcomes-based education. Secondary groups are usually drawn from either SOSE/Geography or Science classes.
- Secondary teachers tend to bring their program with them and need less input from centre teachers. Teachers of secondary groups need centre staff to assist in the delivery of activities and to provide local knowledge. For secondary teachers unfamiliar with the Paluma area, we assist in the development of the excursion program using our collection of secondary learning activities, resources and itineraries.
- Many secondary groups are day excursions, which has budgetary implications for the centre, as the centrally fixed charge for day trips (set in 1999) is minuscule. In the absence of any advice to the contrary, this charge was increased in 2005 to \$5.00 per student and in 2006 to \$6.00.
- Primary or secondary classes working in other Key Learning Areas such as English or The Arts can use Paluma EEC as a suitable venue. For such groups, the level of assistance sought depends on the objectives of the individual excursion. Opportunities exist for the development of centre programs focusing on other Key Learning Areas.
- Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used extensively in administration, communication between the centre’s two sites and in the development and documentation of curriculum programs. All staff members have access to a computer and to the internet and email, but access to the intranet is only available at the Townsville site.
- The use of computers and other ICTs out in the rainforest is limited. We are broadening our definition of ICTs to include technologies more appropriate to our situation, for example, the use of stereoscopic and electronic microscopes, water quality monitoring equipment and digital cameras (still and video).

Social Climate

Our students are drawn from a broad geographic and socio-economic range of schools. The achievement levels in literacy and core learning outcomes students bring with them therefore varies greatly. We cater for such variations by planning learning experiences collaboratively with the class teacher during an individualized pre-visit. Classes with expected limited literacy, for example, Levels 1&2 (Years P-3) remain a very small part of our total visitation.

Students identified by class teachers in 2005 as indigenous constituted only 5.3% of our total visitation, compared to district data recording 14% of students as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Our major strategy for implementing Partners for Success over the last two years has been to collect baseline data on the number of indigenous students coming to Paluma. Maximising student participation in our excursions is an issue we need to be conscious of, although not many solutions are immediately obvious.

Data confirms the obvious trend toward smaller visiting class sizes. In effect, this means we are reaching an ever smaller percentage of the district’s student population. With sustainability increasingly a government priority, there is a case for opening more environmental education centres to service Queensland’s decentralized student enrolment. The reduction in visiting class sizes is the primarily the result of deliberate reduction in middle phase class sizes, and the result of student behaviour management policies precluding some individual students from attending. Economic factors also affect student participation, for example, some families are not able to afford the excursion cost. It is noticeable that with the increased costs of bus transport, schools want to squeeze two smaller classes, or a “class and a half”, into the one excursion booking. Our “traditional” client schools have a changing demographic – they are now in older suburbs and their enrolments are falling, with fewer drafts of each class and more composite classes. While centre teachers report that managing smaller groups in the natural environment is safer and that smaller class sizes are of educational benefit, smaller class sizes reduce the level of locally raised funds and our grant account is adjusted annually according to student throughput. We currently do not have capacity in either accommodation or teaching staff to take groups of more than 32 students. The need for additional accommodation and teachers was identified in our 2005 TSR.

Parents and the Community

The “village” of Paluma is approximately 60 houses along a ridge in the Paluma Range, approximately 85 kilometres north west of Townsville and 65 kilometres south of Ingham. Paluma is surrounded by the upland tropical rainforest (simple notophyll evergreen vine forest) of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Management Area.

At nearly a thousand metres above sea level, the climate of Paluma is considerably cooler than that of the coastal plain, with variations of between five and ten degrees Celsius being common. This small settlement has a resident population of two dozen, with only one couple younger than 50 years old. Paluma EEC is Paluma's largest local employer, so plays a major role in ensuring the stability of local population numbers. The centre is listed as a Recovery/ Welfare Centre in the local emergency services Counter-Disaster Plan. Facilities at the centre are attractive to community groups and are available on weekends to tertiary and government institutions, church, music and cultural groups. Given our proximity to the Paluma Community Centre, we are able to provide accommodation and catering to groups using the adjacent "Town Hall" as a performance/ meeting space.

The cultural heritage of the Mt Spec-Paluma district is of aboriginal occupation (mostly by the Nywaigi and Gugu Badhun linguistic groups), tin mining, timber cutting and wartime military activity. The attraction of the area as a recreational destination was an important reason during the 1930s Great Depression for construction of the Mt Spec Road and its iconic masonry arch bridge over Little Crystal Creek. Tourism remains locally important today. Staff from the centre work closely with the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service in maintaining the walking tracks used by student groups.

Schools that visit the Paluma Environmental Education Centre are drawn mostly from in and around Townsville, giving the centre a relatively high profile locally within this educational community. We maintain this profile by the publication and distribution to schools of an annual prospectus. The "gatehouse" on our front boundary provides visitor information and is popular with the visiting public. Displays within the gatehouse are the result of partnerships between the centre and agencies such as the Wet Tropics Management Authority, Townsville Enterprise and Thuringowa City Council.

The reviewed Education Act will contain provisions for parent and community involvement in centres through the formation of Parents and Citizens Associations. In 2006, there were few avenues for community involvement in the centre. Parent involvement in the centre for most parents in 2006 was limited to their off-site support for their child's learning. Some parents attend each excursion to assist the centre's teacher and class teacher in the safe delivery of the excursion program. We look forward to the implementation of the new Act and the ability to form a Parents and Citizens Association.

OUR STAFF PROFILE

Permanent staff at the Paluma Environmental Education Centre are a teaching principal, an assistant teacher, a unit support officer, a cleaner and an administrative officer and a part-time library aide. The centre purchased a part-time teacher and part-time library-aide in 2006. All staff have been in these positions for some time. Catering was provided in 2006 by private caterers contracted out to visiting schools.

The Paluma Environmental Education Centre is fortunate in having an experienced staff. The assistant teacher has been with Paluma EEC for nearly ten years. The teaching principal has lived in Paluma for twenty-three years. Teaching staff work at both sites of our split-campus school. Support staff members are based at just one site. Communication is maintained between staff at the two sites by the use of paper-based and electronic communications.

All staff members are involved in participative planning and review processes. One day each term is set aside for a whole of staff meeting. These days include a Workplace Health and Safety Meeting, an Annual Operational Plan Review and relevant internal professional development. All staff are encouraged to attend relevant professional development sessions when available. Our administrative officer attended all relevant district-run finance training sessions in 2006 and our unit support officer attended all meetings of the Janitor and Groundsmans Group (JAGG). Our cleaner completed his Certificate III in Cleaning Services. Professional development opportunities for the principal were provided in 2006 through her membership of networks such as OEECPA and the Queensland Association of Primary School Principals (QASSP).

The residential nature of our excursion programs in 2006 meant that staff working at Paluma often worked outside the usual rostered hours for their positions. Very basic overnight staff accommodation is made available to Paluma EEC teachers at no cost while they are working at Paluma. This accommodation is not currently recognised as such by the Local Accommodation Committee. With one staff toilet and shower located in a separate building and the "staff quarters" housed in the original one-teacher classroom, there are ongoing concerns with both the amenity and security of this accommodation. Addressing this need will be the major facilities project to be undertaken in 2007.

All support staff are remunerated for out-of-hours work by the accumulation of ADO time under the relevant Award conditions. ADO arrangements for all support staff are negotiated and documented annually. A Workplace Reform initiative for teachers was implemented in 2001, whereby teaching contact time accumulated is exchanged for negotiated time off (NTO). This trial has been extended until December 2007.

Private caterers have operated at the Paluma site for many years. No groups have self-catered since the beginning of 2005. Following an initial recruitment and selection process many years ago, the incumbent caterers have been subject to satisfactory annual performance reviews. Many other O&EECs directly employ their catering staff. The wages cost is offset by the profits in providing catering. Should the incumbent caterers decide to retire, PEEC could consider a different model of providing catering in the future.