School turns barren playground bountiful

A new initiative helps schools transform concrete wastelands into green and growing natural playgrounds, with benefits that reach into the classroom. Annabel McGilvray reports

FILING in for their first day of the 2015 school year at Melbourne’s Deer Park North Primary School, nearly 400 young girls and boys were met with a bleak vision. Barren packed-earth yards, artificial turf, empty garden beds and cracked asphalt surrounded the school buildings. Old water tanks, that promised plenty but had long stopped collecting or dispensing any water, sat unused.

“Protecting” all of this from vandalism was a giant 4m cyclone fence encircling the 2ha of school grounds.

With research showing that children who play in greener playgrounds have increased attention spans and perform better in maths and reading, Deer Park North principal Liz Balharrie knew changes had to be made.

“We basically had a lot of asphalt in the school,” says Balharrie. “I wanted to improve the natural environment because the asphalt was very hot. On top of that it was cracking, as was the concrete.”

One year later, Balharrie is speaking from her office on the first day of school for 2016. She has spent the morning welcoming the children and their families into a transformed environment.

The cracked asphalt carpark has been replaced by a wetland surrounded by a timber boardwalk. Children can find quiet time in a new “gratitude garden” where outdoor yoga mats encourage contemplation.

Elsewhere, there are raised soil beds filled with green herbs and vegetables that will soon be harvested to become healthy meals made by classes and the canteen; and a new community hub area has seen a large chunk of the cyclone fencing disappear.

Deer Park North is the pilot project for the Schools as a Catchment program, which was created to help schools better manage their water resources and increase green space.

EEV approached environmental engineer, 202020 Vision advocate, and long-time Gardening Australia presenter Josh Byrne for help and they decided to begin with an exemplar that could work as the focus for what would become the resource kit for other schools.

“You’ve got a hot, dry, barren space in a tough neighbourhood – what a challenge,” says Byrne.

JBA began by preparing a water system report that set out a holistic and integrated approach for managing the school’s resources. The water tanks were of particular concern, says Byrne.

“The tanks weren’t well maintained, they weren’t installed properly and there were issues with each of the systems – pumps not working, valves blocked, undersized catchment area,” he says.

“They didn’t need more water tanks but they needed to optimise the tanks that they had.”

JBA set out three water management initiatives that would help with future water needs – stormwater harvesting, rainwater collection and reuse, and efficient irrigation.

In addition to the water audit and design, there was substantial stakeholder engagement involving the school’s staff, students and parents, the local water utility, City West Water, and Brimbank City Council.

The school incorporated the program into their science and sustainability curriculum and students discussed and learnt about water conservation as part of regular weekly science classes with a specialist teacher.

Balharrie says it has been invaluable for the children, and teachers have noticed a new enthusiasm in class.

All the Deer Park North experiences – from lesson plans to sustainable irrigation design – have been included in the resources kit that can be downloaded by anyone.

Byrne says that there has been good...
interest from other schools since its launch at the end of 2015.

“What we’re hoping is that there is a broader uptake of this,” he says.

“The whole idea is that it’s open source – we’ve done the work – the best thing is that people can utilise and share it.”

In the meantime he’s looking forward to visiting the school later this month to catch up on all the changes.