



Little eco-warriors

Kate Fox talks to Fiona Stanley, the classroom assistant who helped turn Summerville Primary into Salford's first Eco-school, and finds out what it means for the school, the children and for her.

Q What does it mean to be an Eco-school?

Eco-schools is run by ENCAMS, which is based in Wigan, and it's basically a management system that runs the school in an environmentally-friendly way. We reduce, reuse and recycle – which everyone should be doing anyway – but the heart of the programme is the Eco Committee. That's a group of pupils who are elected by their peers to represent the class, and they make decisions about what's going to happen in the school. For example, last winter there were some trees that came down in the storms, so the committee asked if they could be replaced by fruit trees so that pupils could eat the fruit from them.

Q How did Summerville get involved with the programme?

I'm afraid I kicked it all off! When my little girl came to the nursery here, almost seven years ago, I was looking around thinking 'they're not using the grounds much, I wonder what they could do?' I started searching on the internet, and I saw a Greenfingers Challenge on the RHS site. The runners-up that year were Canon Burrows School in Ashton-under-Lyne, who are a Green Flag school. I went to visit them and they talked about eco-schools – I was so excited that I couldn't sleep for two days. I suddenly saw how our grounds could be used. It was a real eye-opener. We didn't actually go for the [entry level] bronze award – I looked at the criteria and thought, yes, we're doing all that, let's go straight for the silver. We were the first school in the city to get silver, then the following year we achieved our Green Flag.

Q What do you think the children gain from the experience?

I think it's mainly a sense of being involved. A lot of kids don't really get listened to, and this really gives them a voice. They know they can make a difference. Last year's Year 6 wrote to Gill Baker, the strategic head of children's services at Salford council, and asked if she could tell schools to use recycled paper, and she wrote back saying 'No, they won't listen to me, but they will listen to you.' So the children went along to a primary heads meeting and did a presentation about the importance of using recycled paper – and we know that people are changing over now. One little girl came back and said 'Oh, I changed the world today!' – and she's right, if everyone did a little bit, you'd have the world saved.

Q What do the teachers and parents think about being an Eco-school? The kids are easy to get on your side, whereas the teachers have got so many other things to do. But this programme ticks lots of other boxes at the same time. They can use the wild garden for all kinds of curriculum subjects. When it was being built, a maths class went out and measured the pond hole so I'd know what size liner to get. I think the parents think I'm a bit of a lunatic, but we do get a lot of feedback saying how good the school feels. I think the eco ethos is a fundamental part of the school now.

Q What's your next challenge?

I've become an Eco-schools assessor now, and I really want to get more and more schools to take on board the environmental message and get involved. We want a whole little army of Salford eco-warriors! Teachers from the high school that our children go on to say they're getting nagged by ex-Summerville children about Eco-schools, so I've been over and spoken to them, but secondary schools are a harder nut to crack.

Q What do you feel you've got out of the Eco-school experience yourself?

I was a nervous wreck when I started here – when I introduced the Eco-schools idea to the school governors, I'd never spoken publicly before. But now I've talked off-the-cuff to meetings of 250 people. So many doors have opened for me. It's pushed me into doing things I hadn't before, and made me realise that I'm passionate about this. My generation, and those before me, have really mucked this world up, and we have got to teach our children to do something about it.