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FOR YOUR WORLD



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Case Studies

STEVE WOODHOUSE

Head Teacher

Steve Woodhouse recently asked some of the 90 children at his school whether they preferred learning inside the classroom or outside in the open air. Almost all of them said they'd rather be outside, rain or shine. "I was chuffed about that," laughs Woodhouse, who's been the head at Middleton-on-the-Wolds CE Primary School for the past five years.

Woodhouse's environmental epiphany came when he was head of his previous school. "I went to visit an inner-city school in London which had no green space whatsoever. But I was blown away by what they'd achieved – they had chickens, growing areas and places for teaching outside. It was a lightbulb moment. I got on the train and resolved to start something at my school," he remembers.

That led to a wildlife area, a pond, a willow tunnel and domes, a greenhouse, vegetable raised beds in mathematical shapes, plus a network of footpaths to make it all easy to get to. Woodhouse is sure that it played a part in doubling the size of the school within two years.

Two years after that “lightbulb moment”, Woodhouse moved jobs to take on the headship at Middleton as well as its two sister schools in the same federation in East Riding – and found an almost identical football field desperate for the same treatment.

He hired an environmental assistant as soon as he started, and has since overseen the development of its grounds into a wildlife garden, with vegetable plots, fruit trees and bushes, plus a polytunnel which doubles up as an outdoor classroom as well as growing space. He and his team were the winners of last year’s WWF’s Green Ambassador awards.



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He’s convinced that dedicated people are the key to success, coupled with positivity and enthusiasm right from the top down. “Sure, it’s a financial commitment for any school, but having a specialist tutor to work alongside your staff and weave the environment and sustainability into the curriculum is crucial if you want this to work,” he stresses, explaining how class teachers have more than enough to do, especially when teaching across year groups.

Environmental tutor Sylvia Milner is a former biochemist-turned-learning support assistant, who works 10 hours a week, taking one of the four mixed-aged classes for one afternoon every fortnight. She’s currently helping children survey the plot for pollination potential, which involves measuring, record-keeping, observation, counting and discussing how food is produced. “When you think creatively, everything on the curriculum links up with the outdoor and the environment,” she says.

It's not just Sylvia who's involved though, stresses Woodhouse. "As the head, I'm showing that we mean business – by sharing the passion we have for the environment, it becomes embedded."

The result is that in a pretty short time, children are completely at home in their outdoor environment at school. "It's empowering them, showing them that they can make a difference in life," says Woodhouse. "I'm particularly proud of the fact that they've learnt so much more than they would have done if they'd just followed the curriculum."

"We'll walk round the wildlife area and they can name some of the fungus growing there, or they'll tell me about the plants or creatures they see. When the children can teach you things about the environment, and impress you with their understanding, then you know that they're really learning."



Woodhouse's Words of Wisdom

1. Get the head on board

Make a case for bringing the environment to your school. Having your lead teacher on board is crucial.

2. Be realistic

Small steps work best to start with. Picking a manageable project you can achieve quickly will give you the confidence to carry on.

3. Don't let your surroundings limit your ideas

Some of the best ideas come in schools which have challenging and possibly small environments. Likewise, some of the most wasted opportunities lie in rural schools with loads of spare room.

4. Dedicate resources and money

It doesn't have to be much, but ring-fencing money and staff time sends an important message that you mean business about environmental issues.

5. Don't be deterred by health and safety

Accept that some things – prickly fruit bushes, gardening equipment and ponds all spring to mind – are risks. Life is full of risks, and teaching children about coping with them is an important part of their education.

6. Get out there – whatever the weather

Get the children to keep wellies in school and keep a stash of spare wet weather gear handy. Remember, it's never inappropriate weather to learn outdoors, but inappropriate clothing can make it hard!



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What the children say

Charlotte, 10

"Being outside is really fun, I enjoy digging holes and planting seeds. I love doing the Birdwatch and it's happening again soon! I just like working outside with Mrs Milner in general."

Sam, 10

"I just love the fresh air. Making dens in the wildlife garden is awesome. Also, preparing the PolliNation beds was lots of fun. Mrs Milner taught me how to transfer plants from pots."

Molly, 9

"Mrs Milner teaches us how the outdoors works. I like planting different things and eating the ones that are edible."

Oliver, 10

"Outdoors you can get messy! The fruit we've grown tastes outstanding. I like how we help the wildlife and attract birds using our recycled feeders."

