Everyone knows that children would rather be out than in...
Growing Schools – a major new initiative to harness the full potential of the ‘outdoor classroom’ as a teaching and learning resource.

Concern that young people have become distanced from nature has increased in recent years. With fewer and fewer pupils having the opportunity to experience rural life first hand, and many of them only seeing food stacked on shelves in supermarkets, the connection between source and pre-packed product is often not made.

Pupils from all backgrounds, urban and rural, need to learn more about the rural sector, about food, farming and agriculture, about the countryside and wildlife it sustains, and about the interdependence between the rural and urban environments.

Growing Schools, launched in September 2001 by Schools Minister Baroness Ashton, seeks to do exactly this. To encourage all schools to make better use of the outdoor classroom as a context for teaching and learning, both within and beyond the school grounds.

This leaflet provides an overview of the aims of the Growing Schools initiative, a brief description of work completed to date – including the setting up of five flagship projects – and an insight into the future development plans.

Everyone knows that children would rather be out than in . . .

Every child and teacher will tell you that books aren’t the only way to learn … that there are more vivid, more practical, more inspiring ways of finding out about the world we live in … that you remember best, the things you experience for yourself.

Ambra Edwards
What will Growing Schools achieve?

- Growing Schools aims to encourage and inspire all schools (nursery, primary, secondary and special) to use the ‘outdoor classroom’ as a context for learning, both within or beyond the school grounds.
- Growing Schools aims to enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of the outdoor environment through first-hand experience of growing, farming and the countryside.
- Growing Schools aims to raise awareness of food and where it comes from, of healthy lifestyle choices and to encourage a greater sense of responsibility for the environment.

The outdoor classroom

The concept of outdoor learning is not new. Many schools up and down the country have been using these methods for years, with excellent results which should be recognised and applauded. There are also many organisations around the country, providing a wide range of opportunities for pupils to learn about food, farming and the countryside. These offer an invaluable service to schools, and Growing Schools seeks to give them every encouragement.

Most National Curriculum subjects can be taught outdoors: English, mathematics, science, design & technology, history, art & design or music, while the new focus on citizenship offers huge possibilities for allied physical and ethical exploration.

Essentially, Growing Schools is about curriculum delivery. It is not an ‘add-on’, nor is it about burdening teachers with additional work. It is about providing tried and tested methods that will enable and inspire teachers to use the outdoor classroom as an inherent part of everyday learning.

First-hand experience of growing and the natural environment forms an essential element of the Foundation Stage curriculum. And at Key Stages 1-3, the geography syllabus already requires pupils to participate in first-hand experiences of the natural environment beyond the realms of the classroom.

What stands in the way of outdoor learning?

- Teachers lack confidence and training in using the outdoor classroom
- Identifying clear links to the National Curriculum
- The demands of the teaching leave insufficient time to plan
- Lack of evidence to support the educational value of learning outdoors
- Onerous health and safety requirements
- Lack of funding to set up and manage the development of school grounds as a learning resource
- Fewer opportunities for secondary and foundation stage learning
- Too many rural and countryside organisations offering education, with no single access point, or indication of quality
- Distance and transport costs

Indeed, outdoor learning has long been acclaimed as a powerful method of engaging pupils who do not respond well to the classroom environment. Significantly, the sense of achievement, confidence and enthusiasm many pupils subsequently discover, seems to have a beneficial effect on their overall learning.

Getting the class to the outdoor classroom

Getting out of the classroom poses difficulties for many schools, for a variety of reasons. But with claims that significant numbers of pupils don’t know that milk comes from cows, or that carrots grow in the ground, the need to reconnect them with nature is unquestionable and clearly urgent.

A series of consultations with teachers and providers of outdoor education, held between September 2001 and January 2002, identified nine key barriers to schools using the outdoor classroom (see the box left).

The introduction of the Education Visit Co-ordinators (EVCs) scheme provides an exciting step forward for out of school visits. Generally appointed at Deputy Head or Head of Department level, their job is to plan all forms of visit and ensure they are competently led, properly risk-assessed and will achieve real education outcomes.
The Growing Schools Garden

The aim of the garden was not only to inspire and delight, but also to inform and to educate. It showed how barren playgrounds could be transformed into exciting and welcoming green spaces.

The garden was a huge hit with the public, and received massive media attention. The Royal Horticultural Society judges declared it an inspiration to young people, and awarded it a prestigious silver-gilt medal.

Above all, it provided a magnificent example for teachers, pupils, governors, parents and the general public alike, of what schools can achieve, regardless of location, budget or resources.

The Growing Schools Garden was
a partnership project-managed by Gardening Which? magazine, gardening experts with a track record of successful issue-led/campaigning show gardens. The other partners involved were The Department for Education & Skills (DfES) who initiated and part-funded the project; Learning through Landscapes experts in the development of school grounds as a context for learning; and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens.

The garden was generously sponsored by National Grid Ltd. and also received invaluable ‘in-kind’ support from many other businesses and organisations.

In July 2003, the award-winning Growing Schools Garden was exhibited at the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, to mark the public launch of the Growing Schools initiative.

The design incorporated the ideas, many already in everyday use, from 21 schools around the country, as well as features they had made and plants the pupils had grown from seed.

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Nursery, primary, secondary and special schools were all represented in the garden; some large, some small; some rural, some urban; some from prosperous areas, others from areas of acute deprivation. But common to them all was an infectious enthusiasm, a real commitment to outdoor learning and enormous creativity in the use of their outdoor spaces.

www.schoolsgarden.org.uk

The garden is currently being reconstructed at Greenwich Curriculum Environmental Centre in Eltham, where it will be used as a resource by local schools and as a training facility for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Initial Teacher Training (ITT), both locally and nationally.
Making the case for outdoor learning

Teachers know well enough how pupils flourish in the outdoor classroom, responding with energy, enthusiasm and intelligence. But the independent evidence to prove it has never been comprehensively assembled.

The Growing Schools initiative is being evaluated. Each project is undertaking its own internal evaluation, while the success of the overall project is being evaluated by the Council for Environmental Education and the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment based at Bath University.

In addition, the DfES, Countryside Agency and the Farming and Countryside Education have jointly commissioned a comprehensive study of the research evidence relating to pupils understanding of food, farming and land management. The research is being carried out by the National Foundation for Education Research and Kings College London whose findings will be published in a separate document later this year.

The five flagship projects are scheduled to culminate in May 2003 and will provide valuable outputs, case study material and examples of inspirational practice to encourage and inspire other schools.

The DfES has committed £500,000 to the Growing Schools initiative over the past two years. As a result of this funding five flagship projects have been established.

Proving the concept – setting up flagship projects

Each project is managed by a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) experienced in the field of outdoor learning. The overarching aims for all the projects are:

- to tackle the barriers to outdoor learning identified in our consultations September 2001 to January 2002
- to develop the tools, the resources and expertise, to help schools derive the maximum benefit from the outdoor classroom.

Each project is focusing on number of different areas. These include the delivery of the Foundation Stage Curriculum; the 14 to 19 Curriculum; the potential of the outdoor classroom in providing continuity across the key stages; the development of teacher training materials; the learning opportunities provided by allotments, city farms and community gardens; developing the potential of environmental centres; and the development of growing zones within school grounds.

Most of the projects are working in partnership with other organisations and government initiatives, such as Healthy Schools, many of which are already working with the schools now involved in the projects.

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Project organisation

The project has established three ‘partnership clusters’, each based around an institution of higher education responsible for initial teacher training, and also involving local schools, Learning and Skills Councils, as well as organisations and businesses involved in farming and growing. Located in Sunderland, Sheffield and Gloucester, the clusters reflect the different needs and attitudes of both rural and urban environments. Local, primary, secondary and special schools are all represented, as are interests as diverse as the National Gamekeepers’ Association and the Soil Association.

Each cluster is charged with developing models of teacher training – both Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in the higher education establishments and In-Service (INSET) in the partner schools. Indeed, secondary schools are developing INSET not only for their own teachers, but also for teachers in feeder primary schools. The intention is to make these models as widely and speedily available as possible.

Training the teachers of today and tomorrow

To develop knowledge and understanding of farming and growing among teachers and to equip them with the skills to enhance teaching and learning in the National Curriculum.

This project tackles head on the insecurity that many teachers feel when they step outside the classroom. If schools are to develop programmes of teaching and learning through the vehicle of farming and growing, then clearly teachers must have a thorough knowledge and understanding of these areas. Once they have this, then they can identify areas of the National Curriculum where that knowledge can be applied and produce high quality learning opportunities within those areas of the curriculum.

The project seeks to address these issues through innovative programmes of teacher training. The key aims may be summarised as follows:

- to help teachers grow in confidence and competence, so that they are able and willing to use farming and growing as a context for learning
- to develop best practice in the training of teachers in these new skills, both in teacher training colleges and within schools
- to share that best practice locally and nationally
- to promote progression in teaching and learning between Key Stages 2 and 3.

The project focuses on particular areas of the National Curriculum, principally Citizenship and Personal, Social and Health Education. The intention is to develop both processes and materials that will help teachers teach confidently and effectively in these areas.

The Countryside Foundation for Education (CFE)

CFE is an educational charity established in 1986 to promote an understanding of the countryside as a living, working environment. It provides a range of balanced teaching materials for schools that inform and encourage debate about the countryside. It also offers training for teachers about how to use the countryside in their teaching. CFE is committed to ensuring that our largely urban population, and young people in particular, should be able to make choices about our countryside from a basis of knowledge, reason and understanding.

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It will generate lesson plans, material for case studies and resource packs, in addition to models of best practice. These can all be incorporated into affordable long-term packages of support for nurseries, playgroups and schools across the country, which meet the requirements of the Foundation Stage curriculum.

**Aims**

- to help young children understand where food comes from, and how we rely on plants for food
- to give children first-hand experience of growing and harvesting food
- to reinforce the health and community benefits of growing and harvesting food in Early Years settings
- to encourage the participation and support of parents and the wider local community.

Learning through Landscapes

Learning through Landscapes is a national school grounds charity, dedicated to helping schools improve their grounds for the long-term benefit of children, young people and the whole school community. The charity helps schools by undertaking research, giving advice and encouraging action, and seeks to involve the entire school community in developing these important resources, including pupils, teachers, non-teaching staff, governors and parents.

Growing Upwards

Growing Upwards is a pioneering partnership project between ten Early Years settings and twelve supporting organisations in North Yorkshire. The project focuses specifically on children of nursery age (3 to 5 years old), growing up in a mixture of urban and rural areas.

Each nursery is creating a growing area within its own outdoor space, with the aim of giving all the children first-hand experience of growing and enjoying their own food. Some of the schools can aspire to a vegetable plot. Others have to make do with tubs, window boxes, and even yoghurt pots. The important thing is that all the children should have a go themselves.

The project hopes to persuade all those involved in Early Years education (teachers, support staff, parents and carers), to recognise the rich benefits of growing and harvesting their own produce, and to encourage them to become actively involved.

Growing Upwards will show how growing food contributes to objectives for early learning and provides an excellent basis for later health and citizenship education.

Grounds for Growing

Grounds for Growing is working with nine schools in the London Boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham to design, develop and manage new food growing areas in their grounds. These are all designated as areas of acute social deprivation, and fall within a Health Action Zone.

The project is designed to get students participating actively at every stage, from deciding on the siting and construction of the areas, to picking the crops. The aim is to ensure the students drive the project with the help of the whole school community, reaping the benefit of innovative ‘hands-on’ learning and the acquisition of new practical skills.

The food growing areas provide a new and welcome resource for learning in everything from music to maths. It also links directly into a host of other local and national initiatives such as Education Action Zones, the National Healthy Food Standard and Food in Schools.

The whole process is being exhaustively documented and evaluated, and will provide valuable material both for research and for similar initiatives in other schools.

In particular, the project seeks to discover what the impact of food-growing will be on the wider school community.

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Growing Centres

To provide first hand experiences of growing and farming at field study centres

For NAFSO’s Growing Centres project, six member countries were selected from around the country, from Bromley, Cambridgeshire, Lancashire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire. These NAFSO members would develop innovative projects at their Centres to enhance teaching and learning through farming and growing.

The six projects incorporated a wide range of approaches, but all were concerned with bringing learning to life by giving pupils first hand, practical experiences of farming and growing, which included some or all of the following:

- developing areas on Centres sites for growing food crops or keeping animals
- involving visiting pupils in tending crops and caring for animals
- developing links with local farms and providing school visits to farms
- linking activities to curriculum requirements and training teachers
- relating all of the above to food and diet, and to countryside and sustainability issues.

Bromley Field Studies Centre has, in partnership with the New Deal Environmental Task Force, seen pupils involved in allotment design, planning, planting and maintenance, as well as harvesting, cooking and eating their produce.

At Hothersall Lodge in Lancashire, a complete farm visit package has been created resulting in a service for local schools which ranges from providing transport to the farm and making outdoor clothing available for pupils, to providing pupil activities and tuition during the visit. Similarly, Northmoor Trust in Oxfordshire has designed and is trialing a programme to encourage school visits to farms and provide training for both teachers and farmers.

As part of a broader Building for Sustainability initiative, the Minstead Study Centre in Hampshire is developing five new interactive learning and recreational spaces on the residential centre’s site, designed to enhance learning about plants and growing.

And at Upware Centre for Environmental Education, new demonstration horticultural plots growing typical fenland crops have been created in Upware Centre grounds, together with an organic recycling system. A horticulture and conservation course has been created for small groups of 14 to 16 year olds and a course on fenland food and farming for primary pupils has involved developing links with a local farm where pupils can compare sheep farming with arable farming in the fenland environment.

The sixth member centre, Stibbington Centre for Environmental Education, as part of its project, transformed dining arrangements for the 2,000 pupils a year who stay in the residential centre. Linking with the Healthy Schools initiative, menus have been revised to incorporate a healthier balance, including sustainably sourced produce, which is delivered by the farmer in person. The farmer has also advised on crop rotations for new plots in the centre grounds, where every day pupils in the growing gang tend vegetables, which are used by the kitchens.

The outcomes from the six projects will, and already are being, disseminated to all NAFSO members to share experiences and models of best practice with other centres throughout the UK.

NAFSO

National Association of Field Studies Officers

NAFSO is the only organisation in the UK which represents professionals employed in teaching, promoting and developing field studies. It has over 300 individual members based at more than 150 Field Study and Environmental Education Centres throughout the UK. One of NAFSO’s key aims is to promote quality field studies, both through its members’ work at their Centres and through teachers’ work in schools. Working with different groups of pupils from different schools every day, NAFSO members are ideally placed to enhance teaching and learning through the environment in significant numbers of schools.

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A number of the groups have established growing areas within school grounds involving pupils in the complete process, from decision making to construction. As a result, pupils have had opportunities to develop new skills, through activities such as building compost bins, chicken coops and hatcheries. Other groups are trialing outreach programmes, working with schools that cannot get out, taking the farm or the garden to them instead. The most popular programme to date is undoubtedly the Animal Road Show!

Raising awareness of the many outdoor learning facilities available to schools both locally and nationally is a key element of all the projects.

Some schools already make effective use of community gardens and allotments, but the project aims to build on this, and see more schools and community groups forming sustained partnerships. In the short term, this means enthusing both teachers and pupils to find practical solutions to the barriers that currently hinder them from making the most of these opportunities. However, the key to success for this project will be the creation of fruitful long-term partnerships between schools, farms and community gardens.
The NAPEO projects have set themselves some exacting goals:

- to provide comprehensive training for 75 teachers, including the preparation of lesson plans and schemes of work
- to produce a range of resource materials, geared to the National Curriculum, that will benefit other schools
- to develop learning resources for BTEC National Diploma Early Years
- to develop a wide range of resources for use by schools, including incubators, wildlife gardens and on-line learning opportunities
- to generate material for case studies and examples of best practice

What happens next?

Over the next year, the outputs from the five flagship projects will be disseminated to schools right across the country – through the co-ordinating organisations own networks; through a country-wide training programme for both teachers and providers; through a series of conferences; through partnerships with other government initiatives; and through National School Grounds Week (NSGW – 9th to 13th June 2003).

The outputs will include among other things, modules of teacher training for Citizenship and Personal, Social and Health Education, an excellent and diverse range of teaching resources, plus numerous case studies and carefully evaluated examples of best practice. All will be made easily available via the Growing Schools website.

www.teachernet.gov.uk/growingschools

The website, currently under development, will ultimately provide a one-stop shop for schools to the outdoor classroom, offering access to organisations, information, resources and CPD opportunities. As an umbrella site, Growing Schools intends to act as a magnet, drawing together all resources and expertise relating to the outdoor classroom, providing an online map to make it easy for teachers to find the information they need quickly.

The DfES is working closely with providers of rural and countryside education, and seeks to strengthen the links between Growing Schools and other government and the NGO sector initiatives. The long term goal is to create a single integrated approach, thereby avoiding duplication and providing teachers with a simple and well-supported path to outdoor learning.
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