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11 July 2016

## Groundbreaking schools program sows seeds to help feed the world

Business topics

**bv:** By Business View

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**CSIRO and Bayer have teamed up to educate the next generation about sustainability, running Sustainable Futures, a free education program that's been rolled out to about 450 schools so far. As well as teaching school kids about climate change and where their food comes from, the program is helping them become more engaged in science and agriculture.**

"It's incredible to me to see the number of schoolkids who have no idea where things such as bread or butter come from. They think they just appear on a supermarket shelf by magic," says William Flynn, a former high school teacher who's been heading the Sustainable Futures education program for the past 18 months.

Sustainable Futures is designed for students from Year Three to Year Nine. Developed by CSIRO, it combines the latest in climate science with education in sustainability. The free program has been rolled out to about 450 schools so far.

"What's now known as Sustainable Futures grew out of a pilot program called Carbon Kids," says Flynn. "That was launched in 2009. There's a big focus on teaching kids how they can help combat climate change, as well as encourage their families and communities to do so. But the focus has broadened out to include sustainability in general. Part of that addresses the need for a sustainable food supply. That involves explaining the supply chain of foods to students."

### Teaching kids where their food comes from

To illustrate what's involved in, for example, making a loaf of bread, during a typical Activation Day students will be given some Bayer-supplied barley seeds. They will then have to experiment with growing them with either with a saline solution or fresh water.

"The purpose of that is to make it clear to them that you don't just throw the seeds on the ground and end up with a loaf of bread. You have to do a lot of research and development to get the conditions right for the seed to grow," says Flynn.

With a wealth of resources available, schools can pick and mix their projects.

"Especially since a national curriculum was introduced a couple of years ago, there's been a process of mapping the program to that curriculum," says Flynn. "Units of the program can be used in geography and



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science, even maths and English classes. Schools may already be involved in sustainability initiatives, such as tree planting. Teachers can draw on units of the program relevant to what is already happening at their school."

Flynn observes that the program is equally popular with private and public, urban and rural schools. "I think that's because it's free," he says. "Bayer is keen for us to be in the schools in farming areas, but there's not much difference in how the program operates in those schools as opposed to elsewhere. Those schools can be harder to get to, but we still make the effort to send out CSIRO and Bayer scientists to speak to the students."

Richard Dickmann is Head of New Business Development at the Australian division of Bayer CropScience. He believes it makes perfect sense for his company to assist in educating the next generation about sustainability.

"Mankind is facing some fundamental challenges – one is supplying a growing population with high-quality food," he says. "Bayer's mission statement is 'Science for a better life'. It's crucial we not only attract young people to pursue careers in science but also make sure everybody has an understanding of the fundamentals of science."

### Getting kids interested in agriculture and science

Both Flynn and Dickmann are optimistic about Sustainable Futures' long-term benefits. They hope it will make careers in science, agriculture or some combination of the two more attractive to students.

"The program may inspire some students to think about a career in agriculture or agricultural science. But I wouldn't be comfortable making any claims at this point," says Flynn. "I hope the program will have a lasting impact as far as students growing up with an appreciation for sustainability and the need to use natural resources wisely."

Dickmann is more ebullient. "Any effect Sustainable Futures has on students' career choices won't be clear for years, if ever," he says. "However, when I visit schools that are participating in the program, the teachers tell me the students are enthusiastic. Those students are more engaged in science and doing things such as going home and starting veggie patches in their backyards."

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