



**A Principal's Perspective**  
**Mary-Anne Rooney, 'Go for your life' Kitchen Garden Project at**  
**Eaglehawk Primary School**

Being a 'Go for your life' Kitchen Garden Project with Stephanie Alexander school has been an amazing experience – one which, however, our school was fully committed to and well prepared for. As a school we were looking to extend ourselves into the community, to ensure our curriculum was more meaningful for our students and to find authentic ways to add to the 'healthy living' focus we were developing. The Kitchen Garden Program came along at just the right time. We were able to use the 'Go for your life' funding and the profile of the Program to leverage a number of other funding sources and to create a kitchen and a garden that are incredible resources, not only for our school but for the entire community.

However, our school commitment has also been enormous. My dual role as Program Coordinator averaged a time commitment of .4 for the first 18 months. This role involved project management, application writing for extra funding, visiting other schools with the Kitchen Garden Program, appointing specialists, sourcing materials (we were able to access a lot from schools that were being rebuilt around the region), liaising with the myriad volunteers who support us on a hundred different levels, keeping the school staff and School Council fully informed, organising and attending working bees (most weekends for approximately 4 months as the kitchen was constructed), a lot of public speaking and now hosting visits from other schools and community groups who are keen to see our Program.

We had a number of pressures as the Program was developed. Our focus at first was the construction of the garden, and being in the grip of drought wasn't helpful. Discussion with Brian, our Garden Specialist, highlighted the importance of preparing the soil properly before extensive planting began; this also gave us time to ensure we had the capacity to collect and store water as we have Level 4 water restrictions – no watering from the town supply is allowed. Our garden is now producing bumper crops each season and is a beautiful space that children can relax in every day.

We had a commitment from Eaglehawk Rotary Club that they would assist with the building of the kitchen, which was to be constructed in our old multi-purpose/canteen/sport storage room, with a pantry and offices to be built in the adjoining corridor. This team has built schools and orphanages in East Timor with limited resources and tiny budgets so we knew they had the capacity to support us with this project. The Rotary Club made the kitchen renovation their community project for 2007–2008 and we liaised through their Community Projects Manager to streamline communications. The Rotary Club held approximately 12 full day working bees with up to 12 people involved each time (providing food, cleaning up, building) as well as many hours of their time sourcing materials, planning their tasks, and their own fundraising events for the project.

Another key partner was the facilities manager of the Loddon Mallee Department of Education & Early Childhood Development (DEECD). He visited the school, attended a meeting with staff, School Council, the SAKGF project officer and Rotary, which ensured we were all 'on the same page' and aware of the requirements of DEECD.

The building of the kitchen was a huge process, and again one we weren't going to compromise by rushing, so we arranged for the children to cook at the local secondary college's Home Economics rooms for a term. That school was then demolished in order to be rebuilt, so we then created a temporary kitchen at our school. Again, the appointment of an outstanding Kitchen Specialist was the key to a fantastic Program.

We now have an amazing kitchen space, which is being used for community cooking classes, our breakfast program, our school canteen as well as the Kitchen Garden Program. The benefits are everywhere:

- Socially, we have children working in authentic ways with each other and with community members who volunteer in the school
- Physically, we have happier, healthier children who are growing their understanding of pleasurable eating
- Academically, we have two beautiful teaching spaces that add to the curriculum of the school in many more ways than cooking and gardening
- Creatively, we have worked with all sorts of people to stretch our thinking and to problem-solve along the way
- Emotionally, we have happier children who have a real pride about themselves and their school.

Our annual operational budget is \$4000 for garden materials and \$4000 for supplementary ingredients and other supplies in the kitchen. The cooking budget is \$100 per week

(approximately \$1.00 per child). The school wears the extra power, water and gas costs. We hope to recoup that through levying the parents; to date no one has paid. The gardening budget will be met through school fundraising activities. The VELS curriculum planning was done with the staff being given 3/4 of a curriculum day plus a number of after school sessions.

Words of advice for other schools?

- Make the commitment as a whole school – this is a *huge* program.
- Ensure the planning is thorough – this includes funding sources and volunteer sources, as well as the construction process.
- Appoint great staff who are the right fit between knowing their field and having great communication skills, and value them and their special expertise.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate – with the staff, with School Council, with the community, with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, with the education department, with local businesses.
- Enjoy the process – there will be challenges but this is a once-only opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of the children at your school.