

# National Sustainable Schools Online Conference 2009

Professor William Scott, 20 July 2009

## **BLOG: CHICKEN AND EGG**

The government's target is that all English schools will be sustainable by 2020. Although it's not clear what this will actually have to mean in practice, it does suggest (implicitly at any rate) that focusing on the sustainability of a school, as an institution (as opposed to just addressing sustainability through what is taught and learned through the curriculum), is necessary if learning by students is to be effective. As we all know, a key focus of the sustainable schools initiative is that of the school's becoming a model for activity in the community:

*"Schools ... are invited to become models of sustainable development for their communities ... turning issues like climate change, global justice and local quality of life into engaging learning opportunities for pupils – and a focus for action among the whole school community."*

*DfES (2006)*

But doesn't all this seem a bit overblown? Certainly, many communities up and down the country don't seem to be waiting for their local schools to issue moral direction and practical advice – which is just as well. And anyway, don't we all learn from each other in an iterative fashion as we go along? Richard Norgaard terms this co-evolution.

So, at the risk of seeming a backward-looking, rebarbative, sort of fellow, who's unlikely to win any green awards any time soon (this last bit is true at any rate), let me ask this question: Why isn't it enough for a school to address sustainability in its work with young people through imaginative and engaging teaching, and stimulating opportunities for learning? Just why does a school need to live sustainability out in practice – to be sustainable, in the widest sense, as an institution in order for young people to learn? The rhetoric of the sustainable schools initiative affirms this latter view, of course, as do my fellow bloggers here – and Ken Webster and Craig Johnson (2009) add substance, and challenge, to all this with their description of a fully sustainable school as 'eco-restorative' with positive contributions being made both socially and environmentally. But no-one provides an argument – a justification.

It is clear that there's a choice to be made here by school communities: so just how integrated do you feel that you need to be? Given that the contribution of the school sector to the nation's carbon / ecological footprint is risibly small, why allow an obsession with being sustainable (with most schools failing utterly until the nation's electricity supply is itself derived from fully sustainable sources – maybe by 2035?) divert energy and resource away from stimulating young people's learning? After all, just what are schools for?