

Water Education Case Studies

Project Title: Take it Easy with Water – *Platypus Pete's Water Passport*
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Abstract

In 2007, level 4 water restrictions were in place across much of the Central Coast region. The *Take it Easy with Water* project sought to engage parents and students in reducing their water use in the home. Based on a successful model trialled by the Central Coast Area Health Service to tackle obesity, the project used a water passport and a mascot, 'Platypus Pete' to engage the families. Students were encouraged to undertake a range of 'homework' activities with their parents over a seven-day period. Each task highlighted a specific water behaviour and the key messages of this project were targeted at all household members rather than just the students themselves.

Each student was given a water passport that contained water saving tips, information and daily activities. The home activities were discussed in class the following day and teachers awarded 'Platypus' points for water saving achievements. These points contributed to prizes in a number of categories including; best water investigator, best class average, best water saving school and family with the lowest average water use.

The project has the support of the NSW Department of Education and Training and project activities and key messages were linked to the curriculum for both Primary and Secondary students. 58 schools participated in the project, which was run over a single week. It was estimated that the 58 schools could deliver long-term water savings of 20 ML.

The Challenge

What need was being addressed?

In 2007 level 4 water restrictions were in place across the Central Coast. There was considerable local attention being focused on critically low water supplies and strong community support for restrictions. Average water use per person per week at the time of the program was greater than 1000 L. The *Take it Easy with Water* project sought to reduce this volume by 50%. Project Coordinators identified a gap in water education targeting in home use. They sought to design a project that engaged households in activities that revealed how, when, where and why water gets used in the home and assisted them to identify ways to use water wisely.

Stakeholders

Who participated in the project?

A **critical friend reference group** formed prior to the project design phase to discuss options for engaging the broader community in water education and water saving activities. Representatives from 20 schools, **Council officers, community members**, and **catchment coordinators** participated in the group and helped establish the concept. The project was promoted at School Principals' meetings.

The project engaged students from Central Coast schools ranging in age from Kindergarten to Year 12. The primary target audiences however were **parents** and **family members**.

Teachers were provided with a comprehensive guidebook and resources to assist in integrating the program into curriculum during the challenge week and each school nominated a **project coordinator** who oversaw the project implementation and acted as a point of reference and project champion.

The **NSW Department of Education and Training** supported the concept of a service-learning model that engaged students in learning through socially responsible community based initiatives. **Local businesses** were also approached to provide sponsorship and prizes for the project.

Project Steps

What methods and tools were used?

Funding from the NSW Water Savings Fund was used to develop the project materials and supply resources to participating schools. The teachers guide provided suggestions and advice to assist in preparing students for their next water saving activity and reviewing their last.

All schools participated in the project during the same week and this provided good opportunities for media coverage about the initiative and the competition. Further promotion of the project was achieved through a high profile launch at the beginning of the challenge week.

The project utilised a water passport that students used to record water use in the home each day. Water credits (called Platypus Points) were awarded for water saving actions undertaken by all members of the household.

Parents were expected to participate in the program by assessing actions, undertaking water saving behaviours and signing off on the passport each day. By engaging all members of the household, the project targeted the behaviours of people outside the direct influence of water regulatory authorities.

Project messages were supported by posters, tattoos of Platypus Pete and the passport itself, which was an important source of information for students. The Central Coast Area Health Service have been effectively using this model for targeting behaviours in the home for their education campaigns centred around obesity and health.

Project Outcomes

How persuasive was the project in addressing the need?

By engaging all members of the household, the project was especially effective in reaching a previously untapped target audience. Using homework as a tool to encourage student led learning and action in the home proved a very effective method to address water usage behaviours in the home.

58 participating schools with an average of 200 students per school reported reduced water consumption at home during the challenge week by an average of 428 L. This equated to an estimated saving of approximately 5 ML in a week but a much greater amount in the long term.

Evaluation of the project sought feedback from teachers, students and parents and indicated that the passport was a useful way of raising awareness about water issues but the commitment required to complete all of the tasks in the passport made it difficult for many people. 59% of households that received the passport were unable to complete all of the required tasks. Individual teachers were responsible for undertaking the project with their students and as a result there was a wide variance in the level of engagement at participating schools ranging between 20% and 80% of students involved.

The project was effective in linking behaviours in the home with broader conceptual issues around water security in the Central Coast region. By developing the skills and knowledge of participants more sustainable behaviours were showcased and embedded within the target groups.

Reflections

What lessons were learned?

One of the key challenges with this project was participants' ability to maintain their obligations to the passport activities for a full week. It required a considerable time commitment and it is possible that for some working families it was a major barrier. Given the large number of working professionals who commute from the Central Coast to Sydney each day this barrier may have been particularly noticeable in this region.

Available funding was only able to support a small amount of in-service training for teachers implementing the project. This resulted in considerable differences in the depth of engagement across schools and classes. By conducting the project across the region all at one time there were better opportunities to leverage media and coordinate competitions among schools. However, personalised attention and support was difficult and sometimes lacking. Additionally, there was only limited support for School Coordinators and the potential to develop a stronger network of champions in the region was not fully realised. An opportunity to embed a capacity building element in future programs is identified as a desirable outcome.

The project capitalised on a prominent environmental issue at the time and as a result managed to garner widespread support from schools, the community, media and households. There is potential for this project model to be adapted to capitalise on other emerging environmental issues.



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