

Shane Ngatai's Sustainable Kids 25 May 2009

The seeds of Shane Ngatai's Sustainable Kids Programme were planted 2006 and have been flourishing ever since. Attendees at the Agencies for Nutrition Action Conference, 25 to 27 May, were presented with the school's inspiring model of healthy and sustainable living that has been embraced by the community of Dinsdale, Hamilton.

What started off as a vegetable patch at Rhode Street School has grown into a whole-of-school project that keeps on expanding. As the school principal, Mr Ngatai's vision was to create a sustainable school environment.

"The idea of the programme was always sustainable, healthy living and healthy attitudes. I wanted the school to become the basis for a sustainable community, and create resources to do that. Not an easy task in an inner-city school.

"As a community we felt this generation of kids had missed out on growing things for themselves. Most children thought vegetables came from supermarkets and were eating too many processed foods. We knew it was our responsibility to teach them the life skills they need to stay healthy."

After receiving funding from the Ministry of Social Development's Enviroschools Programme, in order to grow and process food at the school, the Sustainable Kids Programme came to life.

"We started off by putting a garden in the school and the kids were immediately inquisitive. They did some research projects on how to keep the garden going and after a while, each class had a garden of its own. Eventually, healthy living and sustainability started to become a fundamental part of the whole school environment.

"We now grow huge amounts of fruit and vegetables. We have a quarter acre vege garden, two orchards and we've got a hydroponic tunnel that allows us to grow vegetables like pumpkins and kumara in winter. Our cafe produces healthy breakfasts and lunches – and almost all the ingredients are grown at the school. Every child from the age of 5 to 13 works in the kitchen once a week."

The Sustainable Kids Programme has been so successful that it has extended into the whole community.

"Any excess food grown is sold at the farmers markets. We now also have an allotment at the school for elderly people in the community to work on – they come to the school and share their knowledge with the children."

The school plans to extend the project even further and Mr Ngatai intends to help other schools to adopt similar programmes.

"There are already four other schools sending their students over to get involved in the project. The next step is to make the Sustainable Kids Programme into a model for other schools to emulate. Engaging the whole community and establishing really positive relationships is essential. When there are so many people involved, the programme just keeps on growing."