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JUDGES' REPORT

COMMUNITY INNOVATION

SPRINGLANDS SCHOOL TAYLOR RIVER WRITERS' WALK

INTERVIEWED

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DATE

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JUDGES

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INTRODUCTION

Initiated in 2010, the Taylor River Writers' Walk was the result of students taking action after completing a project on water conservation where they went on stream field trips to assess the health of the waterways.

They measured bug life, water temperature, water clarity, water flow and the catchment area and were shocked at the lack of fish and wildlife in the Taylor River. They wanted to protect this river for future generations and to spread the message of the environmental importance of urban waterways.

Writing about the river was a way of promoting awareness of the Taylor River and its value.

This is one of only three writers' walks in New Zealand/Aotearoa and the only one developed and led by school students. Twenty schools are now represented on the walk where poems are etched on plaques mounted on granite rocks along the riverbank.



The students aim to have every school in Blenheim represented along the walk and considerable work has been done to communicate the idea and ethos of this project to other schools.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Springlands is a Green-Gold Enviro School and as a result students already had an awareness of the environment and the impact of humans.

Their involvement in the Council's Whitebait Connection Programme was the inspiration for the writers' walk. The students wanted to do something to change people's attitudes towards the river. Developing the Writers' Walk as an educational and awareness-raising tool, led by the students.

Realizing they needed some sponsorship and a public champion, they approached the mayor, Alistair Sowman. He helped get support from funeral directors Geoffrey T Sowman to sponsor the project and supply the granite panels. The students decided on granite after researching other resources and techniques as the granite met the Council criteria. The students then asked Geoffrey T Sowman if they would sponsor the first poem.

At the unveiling of the first rock/poem the Mayor congratulated the students for their vision and challenged them to get more schools involved. Geoffrey T. Sowman then announced they would like to continue sponsoring more schools to take part as they believed the Writers Walk would play a valuable part in helping raise awareness about protecting water ways.

The Writers' Walk became a partnership project between Marlborough schools and the Council. Mayor Sowman was particularly supportive of the venture and still regularly attends the poem unveilings and encourages the students.

Every year, a new cohort of students are introduced to the project to keep it alive. One of the original students (now at university) is also still involved and attends each year. While two teachers - Cathee Wilks and Ali Kay - have been involved from the start, they 'lead from behind' to guide and enable students in their decision-making about the project. The project is strongly supported by the principal and staff at Springlands School.

The learning in this project has been immense – stream health, writing poetry, presenting the poems on the walkway so they are waterproof and resistant to vandalism, and the communication of the ideas and intent of the project. Students are clear that they wanted a voice for the river, raising awareness about the importance of waterways to people are more likely to value and protect them.

There was a lot of authentic learning in the initial stage of the project, such as where to place the rocks and how to secure them safely in case of flooding, and how to keep the area free from weeds. Each year students work with the Council, organise the unveiling, communicate with sponsors and schools, and work with the media to promote the project.

Each year since 2010, all of Marlborough's schools are invited to submit a poem. It must be original and all their own work. They are encouraged to use descriptive language and to evoke an emotional response about the Taylor River environment as well as other Marlborough waterways.



Judging is done by a panel comprising a Council representative, a sponsor's representative, a teacher and representatives from the Springlands School Writers' Walk.

The project is always evolving and it is interesting to see the change in focus in poems over the years. Students are writing more about the history of the river and how it has been used. Te reo Māori and Māori concepts are more evident. At the annual installation ceremony of the chosen poems, Springlands School Kapa Haka group performs and karakia are an integral part of the ceremony to bless the stones and set them in place. And back at the school there is a rock with a mihi to connect the school with the river and the walk.

There has been considerable community interest in this project. The Top of the South Writers' group are very supportive and the local peace movement has been involved. Local businesses have also been supportive as are the parents at the school.

Currently the students are seeking sponsorship for a brochure and a logo to explain the project and communicate it more widely. They have visited the i-Site to encourage staff to tell people about this gentle, wheelchair accessible walk along the river. They have been unsuccessful to date in getting a map printed, but are now looking at a storyboard at each end of the walk, or using QR codes at intervals so people can use their phones to hear stories such as seniors reminiscing about the river and lwi conversations.



THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY:

- Student engagement – Children have great ideas and an ability to see beyond problems. This project exemplifies what happens when you listen and 'lead from behind' and let children develop the direction.
- Hearing children's voices, which are too often ignored. This brings a different perspective to the walk for people using the walkway, potentially targeting a different audience.
- The marrying of arts and sciences to learn about the state of the river and take action to raise awareness and make a difference. It is an authentic, holistic learning opportunity as the children identified the issue, developed the plan, sought sponsorship and brought the project to fruition.
- It is a lovely walk, accessible to people at all levels of ability. Watching people engage with the poems demonstrates that the idea and intent of the children has been a success.

PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- The need for sponsorship was pressing as schools have no spare money for such initiatives. Students tackled this by identifying potential sponsors and then approaching them with a well thought- through plan and a good rationale.
- Engaging other schools is ongoing. This has involved a certain amount of work to communicate the benefits to other schools. As they have come on board and some of their students have been successful in getting poems on rocks, they have become more engaged. Schools range from Picton to Ward, a considerable geographic distance.

- Maintaining the impetus is always a challenge. A committed ex-student helps with this as well as the two teachers involved. To mitigate this, each year a small group of interested students take the lead, with two of them accompanying the environment award judges on the walk.
- Ensuring that other learning benefits don't overtake the initial impetus of maintaining stream health. Covid had an impact on the project, with a pause in students stream testing and scientifically evaluating progress through the data. This remains an ongoing issue but efforts are being made to incorporate it more into the science classes at the school. The Writers' Walk challenges schools to study the waterways before writing their poems. Council enviro-school programmes are available and encourage students to take part in freshwater monitoring.

SUMMARY

There has been an immense amount of learning in this student-led project. From the initial environmental focus on stream health, students moved into a solution-focused approach developing a plan of action to raise awareness of the issues around the health of the Taylor River.

Pride in participating and the annual selection and launch of poems keeps the Kaupapa alive and is achieving the aim of leaving an environmental legacy for future generations.

The two key staff members involved have acknowledged that children have great ideas and have listened to the students, working collaboratively to ensure that the students have ownership of the project.

The poems themselves invoke mindful moments and cover a range of issues, including past uses of the river and current issues like Covid. They will be a fascinating story of this Kaupapa for many years to come.

SUGGESTIONS

- It would be useful for the students to resume water testing to bring the focus back to understanding and charting the changes in the river. The arts – history and expression through poetry – are strong, important themes. Now science, data collection and a focus on the environment needs to become more evident to complete the picture.
- Approach Environment Award entrant DNAiTECH about using their stream monitoring equipment. The company has developed a freshwater testing programme for secondary schools that could be tailored for primary students. Dr Murray Broom, murray@dnaitech.com 021 429 962.
- Succession planning – Currently the teachers involved are in influential roles across Marlborough Schools and this initiative is part of the Council's strategic plan. This may not always be the case. Sustaining it for the future and ensuring others are passionate about carrying it on is essential so this project can continue and possibly expand.
- Some excellent work has happened to involve Iwi and work with Te Reo Māori. Consolidation of this is important and it would be good to have local Iwi as part of the judging panel and in other decision-making roles.

- Communicating the ethos and experience to walkers when they come to the Taylor River remains an ongoing challenge. Following up on the plan for storyboards at each end of the walk and use of QR codes with local stories can only enhance this experience for walkers.