Tuesday morning is here and 25 students from Year 2 at our son Oliver’s primary school wait excitedly for the bus to take them to the local farmers’ market. The children planned their lunch menu in class the previous day, and will buy ingredients from stallholders who look forward to their weekly visit. Back at school, they will prepare and enjoy a healthy lunch. Meanwhile, children from another class are incubating eggs for our new chook house, others are planting seedlings in the vegetable garden, and another group prepares a trip to help revegetate local sand dunes. About 70 locals turned up at the school recently to plan a new community garden. Only 500m from the school, the garden will be a focal point for environmental education, with students planting and growing fruit trees, herbs and vegetables. Tucked away on the northern boundary of Byron Shire, just south of the Queensland border, Ocean Shores Public School caters for about 330 students. Within walking distance of the beach, it backs onto Billinudgel Nature Reserve, and has its own environmentally significant paperbark wetland area.

When Oliver turned five, some four years ago, we chose the school because it has a cohesive, caring community.
and as we live out of town we wanted him to get to know the local children. Environmental issues were not high on the school agenda, however. Enrolments were falling, and the school was awaiting a new principal.

Talking to other parents, we were encouraged to find many shared our passion for environmental education, music and the arts, and were as keen as we were to see them incorporated into school life. A year later, with the support of a new principal, Chris Hauritz, we came up with a plan to implement creative arts and environmental programs and use these initiatives to revitalise the curriculum and encourage new parents to join the school.

We forged links with community groups, environmental organisations, artists and musicians. The response was overwhelmingly supportive. WetlandCare Australia helped us obtain a Caring for Country Grant, and with enthusiastic students, staff and parents we reconstructed a nature trail through the wetland and planted a rainforest buffer zone.

**Working together**

The students learn about wetland ecology, how to identify plants and the importance of conservation. Some are trained as guides to show visitors the area. The farmers’ market helped the school set up vegetable gardens and supplies us with seedlings and equipment. With the help of Byron Bird Buddies, we are setting up nest boxes with built-in cameras that will transmit back to classrooms.

“Opening the school to community organisations has brought a whole raft of new educational opportunities to the school,” says Chris Hauritz. “This allows students to take active roles in the community and increases parent involvement. Parents teach music, visual arts, robotics, computer animation and gardening, and play an important role in the school’s literacy program. Our kids help to restore the sand dunes, plant the community garden and teach visitors about the importance of conserving wetlands.”

Bridging the gap between school and community has worked. Enrolments have increased, students are learning about sustainable, healthy lifestyles, and the school has won a number of environmental education awards. It’s a pleasure to see staff and parents working so well together to introduce such exciting new elements into the curriculum, and to know that our children are growing up as an integral part of their local community. **GA**