

Green Schools Program: An Out-of-classroom Experience

By [Learning Curve](#) | Mar 31, 2015

During the past 25 years or so we have seen environment appear in different avatars in India's education arena, sometimes as a handmaiden of 'mainstream subjects', wedged between pages of chemistry or history text books or at other times as a common theme of all extra-curricular activities as taking 'nature walks' in local parks to making scrap books on local fauna. But never, until now, was it a part of the formal grading system. Environment ceased to be a sideshow after the country's apex curriculum setter and the two dominant education boards decided to allocate scores to it in the crucial school leaving examinations. In a scenario where every single mark is viewed as a stepping stone to a future career, there could not have been a more significant move especially when it came loaded with some more interesting conditions. The assessment, as per the current guidelines, will not be based on the conventional 'study-text-bookwrite-examination' mode. Grades will depend on how active the examinee has been 'on the ground'. Predictably, there has been a flurry of action ever since this diktat was passed. Treating environment as a living, breathing, and 'doing' subject is not a task that the teachers have been trained to perform. There is no ready resource available either in text books or even reference books that can fit into this mould. But as always, the teachers have resiliently risen to the occasion and come up with some remarkable ideas to turn environment into a tangible (grade-able) entity.

Green Schools Program (GSP), a flagship initiative of the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), attempts to lend the teachers a helping hand because it believes that this particular class is of paramount importance. Environment as a topic is being introduced with a fresh perspective to the future custodians of the Planet. It cannot, under any circumstances, be allowed to degenerate into yet another 'boring' subject. So GSP has been designed as a tool to learn Environment 'by doing' which prods students and teachers to come out of classrooms to do things—count, weigh, measure, explore and analyse. Accompanied by the GSP Manual, a do-it-yourself hand book on how to audit water, air, energy, waste, and land, within school premises, GSP introduces a new methodology for assessing the performance of the school community as a manager of these natural resources. The end product is a report card, which CSE helps the school community to prepare, quantifying its own achievements, as well as identifying shortfalls that require awareness and attention. The audit does not require any special equipment or funds. CSE teaches the schools how to collect data using simple techniques that are anyway a part of a school's daily routine. The activities can, in fact, be used as an assignment for any of the subjects in the mainstream curriculum. Through this process GSP attempts to drive home the message that the connotation of the word 'environment' is not limited to trees, birds and tigers. It includes all the key components that make up a human being's life and livelihood. The end product is a report card, which CSE helps the school community to prepare, quantifying its own achievements, as well as identifying shortfalls that require awareness and attention. To wrap up, CSE organizes an annual event called the Gobar Times Green Schools Programme Awards Ceremony. Here, top performers from across the country are rewarded for their enterprise and innovative skills. The objective is to acknowledge efforts made, and also to encourage more institutions to come forward and take part in this movement. The day is celebrated as a festival, when school children from every part of India are invited, not only to witness the award giving ceremony but to take part in painting competitions, perform in street plays, watch films and mingle with each other. Every year at least 5 to 8 schools out of the top 20 belong to the rural sector.

But is GSP working?

The impact of GSP on the school community is apparent if one compares the performance of the participating schools with each passing year. Here it is important to note that more than 50 per cent of them repeat the audit process year after year. Clearly, their objective has been not just to win a contest, but to gauge if they have been able to improve their score cards and become better managers of environment.

Changing trends and perception

In 2006, after the first set of audit reports were submitted and analysed, CSE identified the following trends:

- environment-related programmes are still considered to be extracurricular. No structured approach to bring about actual changes in lifestyle or practices are evident yet.
- schools are willing to adopt innovative methods to conserve energy and water. But follow-up process to measure and quantify the impact do not exist.

For instance, 75 per cent of the participating schools had installed rainwater harvesting systems, but only one was using its actual potential. For the others it was a showcase model - set up and then forgotten. 95 per cent of them were engaged in waste management practices, like vermicomposting, recycling paper. But only 5 could record how much per capita waste was actually being generated in their premises.

In 2007 there was a remarkable shift in attitude and approach in the following areas:

- schools had mastered the art of auditing within one year.
- their data collection, tabulation, and analysis was outstanding

- assessment of impact of resource management practices like rainwater harvesting, recycling of water and waste were far more precise, structured, and accurate.
- the students had obviously been involved in every step. There was a sharp increase in awareness level.

For instance, every school had assigned student groups to weigh waste. Audit teams included sweepers, gardeners, waste-dealers. Students were using spring balances, hand balances and weighing machines and could tell CSE what types of waste were being produced and how much, each day. In 2008, the commitment and perseverance of the participants encouraged CSE to start a new category of awards, called the Change Makers. These were given to schools which had been able to achieve basic, but long-term changes in the mindset and lifestyle of not only the school community, but also that of parents and the neighbourhood. For instance, a school in South Delhi, recorded an 8 per cent shift in commuter practice, with students and staff opting for public transport (some provided by the school) in place of individual cars or two wheelers. The parents had been involved in this decision and they were partners in this initiative. Since then the audit process has matured into a very effective medium to assemble authentic data on status of resources and to identify trends. It clearly indicates what needs to be done, where and how. It can now, therefore, be used by administrators to gauge whether a particular system or policy has yielded results or not. For instance, Delhi schools have made major gains in energy audit because of CNG-run vehicles. This policy has helped them to keep emission contribution to a minimum as compared to the other states. Their scores, however, take a plunge sometimes, because of their growing dependence on diesel-run generators, reflecting the city's power situation.

Why GSP?

It is now evident that this audit is universally required, especially in schools where resources is scarce, where it is needed to ensure that basic needs are met. In schools where there is a surfeit, the audit is required to prevent wastage. The GSP can, therefore, be used by the school authorities as a tool for two purposes. First, to set up practical, achievable 'green norms' for Delhi's schools; then to take a step further and enforce these norms in schools in the form of green policies and infrastructure.

But are the schools actually doing it on the ground?

To answer this I shall share with you a letter we recently received from one of our veteran school partners. It says, 'As you are well aware, our school is located in one of the driest zones of South Delhi. Every summer we are forced to spend huge sums of money to buy water at commercial rates. After we were introduced to CSE's school program, we were determined to reduce our consumption. We have finally found a way to do it. We have converted all eighteen male urinals to waterless units a step that would save 1,70,000 litres of fresh water per year. Each unit costs us Rs.2500/-. The cost of installation can be recovered in the first month itself through water savings.' From wasteful but guilt-ridden consumers to savvy yet cautious resource managers, the GSP gurus have come a very long way! It is truly a heartening development. In the global arena, environment now occupies center-stage. It plays a crucial role in shaping economies, influencing policies and deciding the fate of heads of states. Internally, it is a priority issue in the agenda of every sector - from industry to agriculture. So it is time that we got the most important segment of the population, the students, on board in this discourse. It is now imperative to build up skills, and deepen their knowledge base in these issues. Program like the GSP provide them the platform to express their views, as well as an opportunity to experiment on the ground.

Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Deorali, Sikkim: They have given a fresh angle to the entire GSP audit. They have linked it to health. The girls in this small school, perched on the hills of North Sikkim, ran a very active health club till 2005. They provided first aid to students and staff, and supervised general cleanliness, till they got introduced to GSP. These smart citizens of Sikkim quickly realized that managing solid waste produced in the school, maintaining clean, water efficient toilets, making sure that the water they drank was safe, were stuff as critical, if not more, for good health as medicines and band aids. So the health club became a hub of environment activities. And the school got healthier!

Government Senior Secondary School, Makreri, Himachal Pradesh: Yet another participant from the mountains. This time the scene is set in Himachal Pradesh, and the location is even more remote. But being tucked away in the interiors, 75 km away from the nearest district headquarters has never been a dampener for this supremely energetic school community. It had won several eco awards for its work in preserving local biodiversity - for keeping a seed bank for traditional grains and cuttings of local plant species. What GSP gave these already eco wise people was a reminder that environment is not only about trees, plants, animals and seeds, but also about water, about energy and about waste; that in a State as focused in micro-hydel projects as Himachal, it was essential to begin practicing rainwater harvesting in order to ward off the impending water shortage in farmlands as river beds dry up. And once they were reminded, there was no stopping them. The audit teams lobbied hard with the local panchayat, mobilised resources and ensured that the structures were in place, not only in the school but in the village as well.

What is GSP's future vision?

CSE's objective is to forge GSP partnership with every state government, and to help set up CM-GSP awards in each of them. It is now ready to take up the following responsibilities:


- Build capacity among teachers, students and school administrators through workshops.
- Equip and empower schools, both in the rural and urban sectors, to set up practical, achievable 'green norms'. And then help them to implement these on the ground as green policies, to be practiced in the school premises.
- To enable the involvement of an alternative curriculum. Already GSP is being used by several schools as a tool to conduct Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) of mid and senior level students. But GSP's primary challenge has been to provide the students an opportunity to learn about environment not by memorizing yet another text book, but by 'doing'. The new curriculum will attempt to drive home the message that the connotation of the word 'environment' is not limited to trees, birds and tigers. It includes all the key components that make up a human being's life and livelihood.

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area of interest got more focused after joining Centre for Science and Environment, as a sub-editor in Down To Earth, the Centre's fortnightly magazine. She later contributed as a Specialist writer on Bio-diversity, and took charge of the organisation's Natural Resource Management Unit. But the role of a writer always appealed to her more than that of a researcher. So when she was offered the post of Programme Director, Environment Education Unit, she accepted it immediately, because it allowed her to combine roles - to launch and steer GSP, CSE's maiden education initiative, and be the Editor of Gobar Times, a monthly magazine for students. At present she works as a content consultant, specialised in issues related to the development sector. She may be contacted at dasgupta.sumita@gmail.com

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