

## *How can Quaker Schools move forward on environmental concerns?*

Quaker schools don't think of themselves as polluters, but we contribute to local air and water pollution, habitat disruption and global warming. Our schools generate waste, both standard and hazardous wastes. We are consumers of agricultural production through the food we serve. Our purchases of paper, vehicles, fuel and construction materials have a measurable impact.

In most schools, students are exposed to the pesticides that are used routinely in our buildings, playgrounds and athletic fields. They get further exposure through chemicals used in cleaning, and the additives and preservatives and pesticide residues in the foods we serve. There is increasing and alarming evidence that for children, the cumulative effect of such exposure is demonstrably harmful.

Our schools are faith based. We uphold a Spirit led commitment to simplicity and environmental stewardship. As people of faith, leading institutions that educate students directly through our own behavior, we need to take our role as environmental stewards seriously. We need to model what is possible and demonstrate through our daily practice a commitment to the sacredness of all life. By doing so we may influence the personal decisions students make in their career choices and in turn, in their daily lives. We also have the potential to influence other school communities led by our example.

Many schools, on an administrative level, have already taken steps toward living in right relation. Some have upgraded their lighting system and purchased fluorescent lightbulbs. Others have recycling programs, garden programs, and alternative heating systems. In the classrooms of our schools, environmental education takes many forms. Most recently, a network of Friends environmental educators (FEEN) has formed to provide leadership in our schools around both the science based and spirit based concerns for the environment. Students, through their own initiative, have also influenced our schools by asking school stores to carry alternative products and pushing for recycling programs.

The task of changing our patterns of behavior and consumption to both prevent further damage and begin to restore our relationship is daunting. The small steps taken by our schools are laudable; as yet they are a series of unrelated actions. They can feel like a drop in the bucket.

We have an opportunity to create a commitment to the conversion process necessary to live in integrity with the natural world. To take up this opportunity means we need to develop a practical strategy along with the will to act. We are on new ground. We will need to take action and engage in a continual process of reflection on these actions.

On paper, in many forms, the commitment exists – Faith and Practice, various minutes, the FEEN Statement of Purpose, FCUN, and Eco-witness. Formal action is difficult and Faith and Practice speaks to the resistance we can expect in others and ourselves. One remedy to this is making common cause and sharing the journey to a new relationship to God's creation. How do we use these documents as a guide to teaching, our operations and the investments?

There are many constituent groups in a school community – general committees, administrators, staff, faculty, parents and students, Many if not all of these individuals will struggle with the demands made by an authentic relationship with the responsibility for the predicament we face. Reasons are many; among them the simple fact that many find it hard to see that what they do now has consequences later. In addition, it is often difficult to believe our “little” contribution to the problem matters in the big scheme of things. One practical difficulty of making lasting change in relationship to the environment is that the action required often relies on the need for self-restraint. Our schools must seek a strategic process which will guide us.

Queries to consider:

How can the administrative practices of our schools demonstrate our belief in the sacredness of the earth?

How can we make ourselves aware of the areas in which our school life contributes to current environmental problems?

How can our business practices and fiscal decision making process reflect our commitment to earth stewardship?

As institutions, how can we embody these intentions expressed by us more broadly as a faith community? Are the decision-making procedures for running our schools, which were set at a time when consideration for environmental impact was not as significant, still appropriate?

Do we believe we have a practical and a moral obligation to safeguard the health of our students and staff? What changes would we need to make if we do?

How can our schools begin to reduce their environmental footprint, to become institutions that tread lightly? How can we prepare ourselves to be ready for the long process required to stop doing damage and begin restoration? How would we need to change in order to create no net additional negative impact? What aspects of our awareness and understanding of our every-day personal and institutional actions do we need to change to make this possible?

How might we best review key areas of campus life, which have an impact on the environment? What consideration can be made to involve all members in the community in both understanding the need for change and in the actual implementation of the change? How can we most meaningfully bring together administration, faculty, staff, families and students? How can we best provide guidance, support, and encouragement to each other? What are effective ways to share progress already made and lessons learned?

Areas of immediate concern to our schools

Buildings (energy, lighting, water use, indoor air quality, maintenance, etc.)

Grounds (water, maintenance, pest management of playing fields, playgrounds, landscaping and gardens)

Purchasing (environmentally friendly products, recycling, solid waste reduction, vehicle efficiency)

Dining services (waste reduction, kitchen equipment, water conservation, selecting foods for health and low environmental impact)

Curriculum (integration of environmental education, student participation)  
Management of hazardous materials in laboratories and studios