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NSW preschool sustainability team a finalist in national awards

A team of preschool teachers committed to embedding sustainability practices is a finalist in the 2014 HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards.

Sydney's Dianella Street Early Education Centre is one of five finalists in the Advancing Pedagogy and Practice Award category.

The Centre has been recognised for developing a whole-of-centre approach to sustainability and implementing practical measures that save water, reduce waste and foster learning about the environment.

Centre Director, Deborah Long, said staff wanted to introduce environmental awareness to their daily operations, encouraging the children to become sustainable thinkers.

"Ultimately, our aim is to engage the children and their families in sharing sustainable living practices and experiences with nature," Ms Long said.

"We're concerned that many children have lost touch with nature and may only experience the beauty of the environment when they go to the park or on a holiday. Given the number of families living in units has increased in our community over the past 10 years, we felt this was an important part of the children's learning and development."

Ms Long said the centre conducted a sustainability audit and developed a set of initiatives which are being implemented.

"We have a strong focus on children connecting with nature and have established a designated 'dirt patch' where they can dig and make mud pies, and a zen garden which is a quiet space where children can talk, read or just sit.

"We source all drawing paper from outside donations and use recycled paper for office printing. The children drew water-saving signs for our bathroom and we've installed water-efficient taps.

"Our cook talks to the children about nutrition, worm farms and composting, and our cleaners have developed a system to pack smaller hand towels into dispensers to reduce waste."

Ms Long said an environmental education evening for parents was held this year and staff are hoping to organise a sustainability expo in the future.

Ms Long and other interstate finalists will be flown to Melbourne to attend an awards dinner, where the winners will be announced during the Early Childhood Australia National Conference on Saturday 6 September 2014.

A \$30,000 prize pool will be shared among the winners, generously provided by long-term HESTA awards supporter ME Bank.

The Advancing Pedagogy and Practice, and Excellence in Building Inclusion Award winners will each receive \$10,000 to further implement their program or initiative. The winner of the Outstanding Young Graduate Award will receive a \$10,000 development grant.

HESTA is the super fund for health and community services, with more than 785,000 members and \$28 billion in assets. More people in health and community services choose HESTA for their super.

Visit hestaawards.com.au for tickets for the awards dinner or to learn more about the awards.

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