The Education Triple Bottom Line

Michael Posthumus

Grand Valley State University

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol10/iss1/4

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Have you heard of a “Triple Bottom Line?” The term is widely used in the sustainable business world as a description of an operational philosophy for sustainable business practices. Businesses that adopt a triple bottom line believe they have three separate “bottom lines” upon which they gauge their success as an organization. The first bottom line (and the most predictable) is the economic bottom line, or the business’s ability to generate revenue and create profits. The second bottom line is the measurement of environmental impact, or an organization’s ability to reduce energy consumption, waste, water use, and overall footprint on the earth. The last bottom line is social capital, or the investment and development of the local community’s social assets including people, organizations, education and other systems. When businesses adopt a philosophy of “Triple Bottom Line” operations, they attempt to unify the goals of each bottom line to create a valued, profitable, and environmentally sustainable business (Savitz, 2006).

One example of an organization that operates using a Triple Bottom Line in West Michigan is Steelcase, Inc. Steelcase takes great effort to recycle, reuse, or sell most of the waste generated from its furniture manufacturing operations in order to reduce overall environmental impact (and ensure they have materials to continue manufacturing furniture in the future) while maximizing profits. Additionally, Steelcase invests huge amounts of money into the local community by funding environmental education initiatives, local university development, and general social capital-building activities in the region. As a result, the community is becoming better informed and educated about Steelcase’s business practices and sustainability. In turn the community values the company for its efforts in providing jobs and learns why Steelcase, other businesses, and the larger community benefit from environmentally conscience decisions and actions. Steelcase benefits economically from the goodwill that develops as a result of sustainability-focused operations and by providing a product that environmentally educated furniture buyers would want to use. Each of the “bottom lines” help support another, in a system that fosters true sustainable business practice (Wege, 1999).

You might be thinking, “What does this have to do with education?” I personally believe this concept is very important for our profession. Thinking about education with a triple bottom line perspective can help us foster powerful educational programs and develop meaningful experiences for our students, all while keeping the cost of innovative programs down. As part of Groundswell, a project of the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative housed at the Grand Valley State University College of Education, we continually evaluate our programs to find better ways to achieve sustainability. In today’s low-budget and high-stakes teaching environment, educators need to be more inventive than ever; so why not tap into the entrepreneurial business-minded spirit hiding within each of us by using a proven model?
The Triple Bottom Line

Social

Bearable

Equitable

Sustainable

Environment

Economic

Viable
This summer, Groundswell began brainstorming how schools might use the idea of a “Triple Bottom Line” to improve environmental place-based education. The result of our brainstorming was development of an “Education Triple Bottom Line” or ETBL. The idea behind the ETBL is schools could use environmental education at a district-wide level, teach about sustainability and stewardship, and meet curriculum content standards and benchmarks at no additional cost. The Groundswell network realized students, teachers, and administrators could work together to identify costly environmental issues facing a district, create plans to teach about those issues, and then solve those issues through service learning projects that engage learners in relevant activities and help the district be more environmentally conscience while saving money. The cost savings realized by more sustainable and environmentally conscience operations could then be reinvested in further sustainability projects and environmental education initiatives.

Consider the following scenario:

Large school districts own huge swaths of land that are typically covered by grassy, high-maintenance lawns. These lawns require fertilizers, water, gasoline for mowing, and employee-time so they can be maintained continuously. In addition much of the space is not utilized beyond “looking good.”

After identifying this potential for change, teachers developed a curriculum to introduce science concepts integrating water and carbon-cycle, non-point source pollution, human impact, and sustainability into lessons about ways their schools could be more “green.” As a result, the students chose to engage in a service learning project and propose a plan to reduce their district’s high-maintenance green spaces by 10% to save water, fuel, and money.

Students use geography and mathematics to plot their own schools on maps, calculate surface areas of green space and determine the volume of water or gasoline used each year to keep their lawns green. Other students write persuasive essays to building administrators, school board members informing them of a plan to be more sustainable and save money. Another group creates informational materials to advocate for fertilizer and water use reduction throughout their community. As a result of the students’ marketing materials, partners in the community volunteer and donate resources to help schools remove expensive sod and install low maintenance native plants, trees, and other natural features. When the projects are completed the district can boast it has reduced its environmental footprint, engaged students in relevant and meaningful educational experiences that foster critical thinking and problem solving, and has saved money by reducing maintenance costs. In addition reclaimed areas can be used for habitat studies or for school gardening, changing them from unused lawns into valuable outdoor learning spaces. The following year, some of the cost savings then can be reinvested in the next sustainability project.

Think this is too good to be true? Think again.

Next year, Groundswell will begin piloting this very concept with support from the Grand Rapids Public Schools and Forest Hills Public Schools. We hope to prove that a small kick-starting investment can be a catalyst for bold and meaningful change in both educational practice and organizational operations. With the combined effort of students, teachers, administrators, and the surrounding community we can provide sustainability education with an ETBL that funds itself, and I believe the goal of programmatic self-sufficiency is of the utmost importance as school budgets and support for special programs continue to dwindle. We plead to our students to innovate, solve problems, be creative, and think outside the box; now it is time for us to do the same in the name of sustainability and most importantly for our students’ best interests.

References: