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Taxing calculation adds up to victory

Not even Australia's government experts have been able to properly explain how the proposed carbon tax will affect the average Australian household. But a year 10 student from Loreto Normanhurst girls' school in Sydney managed to use her maths skills to determine just how much Australians will be paying under the government's plan. 

Isobel King's project for the National Mathematics Talent Quest last year demystified the carbon tax and helped her take out the top prize.

"My project involved estimating the price of the carbon tax," King says. "It was such a topical issue in the media so I decided to investigate its social and economic impact.

"My family is very involved with the news and my dad is passionate about the environment, so I started gathering statistics (related to the carbon tax). I had to make a few assumptions because of the limited knowledge I could gather and decided to focus on how it would affect households."

King says winning the competition was a surprise but simply entering made a challenging subject more relevant to her life.

The head of maths at Loreto Normanhurst, Carol Osborne, says the National Mathematics Talent Quest helps students understand the concepts of maths and the world they live in. Other students have determined the benefits of installing rainwater tanks, predicted rowing performance and made engine comparisons.

"That element of critical thinking helps them make sense of the world," Osborne says. "The girls at Loreto Normanhurst are really creative in their entries and it is good to see them thinking about how they can apply their maths."

"We try not to give them the ideas and direct their learning but the competitors find a good chance for them to research something they are interested in." King's win was the second time the school has won the national title, although it has had great success at the state level. Osborne says: "Isobel impressed the judges because she took something topical and managed to pick out the important parts to simplify it enough to apply maths to it. Then she managed to communicate her findings in a way that mere mortals could understand."

Katherine Adie