European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools, Sub-group on Education for Environmental Sustainability

Whole School Approaches to Sustainability: Key Messages

EN

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Key Messages

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1. Introduction

The policy messages outlined below are drawn from discussions that took place over the course of two plenary meetings of the EU working group on sustainability education, which looked specifically at whole school approaches to sustainability. The key messages are organised under headings that relate to the main themes identified by group members.

2. Whole School Approaches at policy level

- **Political will and commitment** are key to leading out on policy on learning for sustainability. Both are needed to support actions at grassroots level. Ministries need to focus on supporting the schools' autonomy and giving them **the possibility and resources to advance learning for sustainability.** This permits local level priorities to be addressed as well as main policy priorities to be implemented. It requires **education for policy makers** as well as practitioners, leaders and students. Professional teacher education and development is crucial in this; as is building policy learning opportunities for those leading the initiative locally, regionally and at national level.
- **Engaging with and involving schools** and education stakeholders at every level throughout the entire process of developing policies is key to successful implementation as policies are primarily enacted at that level. This also involves learning from good practice where it is identified.
- Policy-makers need to ensure a **coherent approach** to any policy activity relating to whole school approaches to sustainability. Connecting the different elements (e.g. school curriculum, subject curriculum, teacher education) in a consistent way is crucial to ensure better policy translation at local and institutional level later on. There is also a need to ensure sustainability initiatives connect well to other similar approaches such as whole school planning for technology use.
- Ensuring a good **balance between school autonomy and the regulatory environment** is key. At times, regulations (e.g. concerning health and safety, food in the canteen) may constrict what schools can do in relation to learning for sustainability, e.g. food grown in school gardens may not be allowed in the canteen. Supportive policies can prioritise this vision by placing emphasis on the entire learning ecosystem, within and beyond schools, rather than simply focusing on regulation.
- Understanding and dealing with **the context within and between countries** and providing **opportunities for peer learning** is important. Some countries are further along the process of integrating whole school approaches and sustainable education into their systems. Cultural differences also need to be recognised. Within countries, some schools are further along than others, often due to school leadership. There can also be a divide between what urban and rural schools can do in terms of sustainability education.

3. Student engagement

- **Participating in the decision-making process** is critical. **Self-assessment and peer-review** should be prioritised and **take into account both individual students' and the school's voices** in sustainability issues. The *Eco-schools* programme is seen as a good example of hearing the voices of young people – and the impact this can have on local level action. Another strong example is the *Young Reporters for the Environment* programme which gives young people a platform to research environmental issues and promote solutions through investigative reporting, photography, and video journalism.

- Schools should be empowered to **increase students' engagement in ways that build confidence**. This requires policy work that encourages the development in young people of critical but constructive skills and understandings related to sustainability and living sustainably.

- Developing policy that **supports and facilitates student inclusion in designing and implementing school-led action** is crucial, even if often a challenge. Lack of genuine involvement by students in setting priorities at the school and ministry level holds back activity at the school level. While general guidance from the policy level can support this process, the actors in the school have to find and shape their way based on the specific school conditions. The French *eco delegates* model is a good example of a formalised inclusion where each class in secondary school appoints two delegates to lead on sustainability issues within the school.

4. Leading change in schools

- **School self-evaluation:**
    - Policy action should encourage and emphasise **school self-evaluation** as a **learning journey that supports school development** and change and avoid any notions of compliance.
    - **School self-evaluation** needs to be driven by a **vision** for learning for sustainability that considers all aspects of the school experience. Learning for sustainability **should also be a component of all school self-evaluation efforts** so that it is embedded into the overall strategy on school development.
    - **Localisation and evidence**. General frameworks are powerful policy aids but need to be augmented by local criteria and indicators. Evidence gathering is an important process but not all engaged may feel confident in this area and may need to be supported by professional development or guidance documents. In Hungary, within the *Eco-School* and the *Green Kindergarten* Networks, schools can decide their own focus and take guidance where needed from policy makers.
- **External evaluation** (inspections, reviews) **can reinforce and support** the school's policies and practices on sustainability. The inspectorate can be a key multiplier. However, this is not always understood and included in policy work.

Inspections and reviews that focus on *formative* evaluation – that assist rather than 'judge' – are a powerful enabler of change at the school level.

- **Monitoring and evaluation** (including the use of indicators or benchmarking against statements of effective practice) needs to be developed in support of sustainability **at every level** but particularly to better target resources and training on schools. Indicators can relate to, for example, to the adoption of participatory learning approaches in the classroom. Such indicators can support vision as well as record and reward progress.
- **Engagement at all leadership levels** is key to any meaningful policy-led improvement in learning for sustainability. Specific courses to enhance leadership at all levels are helpful but not yet widespread. Courses for teachers and school leaders that are rooted in local curricula as well as external opportunities provided by for example field centres and national parks are particularly valuable here. A good example is the teacher development provided through the non-profit social enterprise *Education for Sustainability* in Ireland.

5. The school as an example of living sustainably

- Giving schools **time and space to act and live sustainably on a daily basis** is crucial. Teachers are often over-worked and policy makers need to guard against overburdening already loaded curricula and teachers. Allowing schools to define and prioritise their own agendas encourages creative and locally relevant thinking in relation to the challenge of learning and living sustainably. Dealing in this way with the potential overloading of curriculum and activities is important to be able to make room for better links to local communities and municipalities which is so important for sustainability education.

6. Collaborations and partnerships

- Strong and effective collaborations on sustainability depend on **involving people in an inclusive way and providing them with tools, material, and procedures** to develop and run innovative cross-sectoral activities that include schools and other sustainability actors and stakeholders. Supports for this can involve policy action on peer-to-peer activity, networking and developing and supporting communities of practice. In Hungary some eco-schools took up the role of being local and regional knowledge hubs in collaboration with local community and in this way they redefined themselves and also helped others build networks and projects on sustainability. Some of the schools work in unfavourable conditions (rural, minority children with disadvantaged backgrounds) and this new role was their way to become recognised by locals.
- **Partnerships within schools** on sustainability are also important. In many countries cross-curricular teaching needs to be fostered more. Training and support for teachers to develop cross-curricular teaching as well as partnership skills development can help build the skills to reach beyond the school later.
- Policy-makers can act effectively as **mediators in partnerships** among and between schools and in **facilitating collaborations that reach beyond the**

schools into local communities. Channelling financial support can sponsor brokerage events and hubs – such as those organised through Learning Networks in Flanders. This makes it easier for schools to develop and sustain partnerships.

- Collaborations that **provide opportunities for linkages between informal, non-formal and formal education** are valuable to developing opportunities for sustainability education. These not only enrich **the school's curriculum but also introduce** different traditions, experiences and viewpoints. Collaborations through site visits, practice projects, case studies, participatory research and partnership building encourage more contextualised understanding of sustainability issues and practices and can aid moves from silo- to systems-thinking.

7. Capacity building for sustainability

- **Professional learning and leadership are intertwined.** Professional learning and leadership play a key role in establishing a school atmosphere that supports whole school approaches and are closely interconnected. Understanding schools as *learning organisations* means that professional learning can take place in many forms, such as critical friends, peer learning, regional meetings, visits at sites, networks, workshops, conferences etc. These involve teachers and school leaders going beyond trainings and can support horizontal learning opportunities – such as practitioner research – that can be particularly supportive at local level in the longer term. The *Cyprus TLP* offers an interesting model for this type of action.
- **Knowledge exchange in many different forms** is necessary. Young people often have broad knowledge on climate and environmental crises. Knowledge hubs to exchange ideas and/or stakeholder platforms to facilitate dialogue can be helpful. Platforms can be themes/issues based that bring different organisations together. Schools can also serve as such hubs of learning.
- **Policy makers are also learners** on sustainability, including whole school action on sustainability. Providing regular opportunities for them to update their knowledge and competences is crucial to ensure impactful and effective policy making with regard to teaching and learning for sustainability. Summer universities for policy makers working in this area could be one effective means for building capacity as is peer learning and exchange with other policy makers in the national and international context.
- **Strengthening sustainability competences of all adults, including parents and other adults living in the community, is crucial.** Adults can influence policy-making through voting, consumption and other activities. They are also role models for young people and children. Boosting sustainability skills through adult and non-formal learning would contribute to the success of whole-school approaches and support sustainability initiatives at school level.

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