



# THE SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL: WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

Schools play a key role in preparing students for a sustainable future. They equip learners with the knowledge and skills needed to understand and respond to sustainability challenges, both in their communities and future workplaces.

A whole-school approach brings sustainability to life for students. Instead of treating sustainability as a subject or topic, it is woven into daily school life. This means integrating sustainability across different aspects of school life - embedding it not only in classroom activities and the curriculum, but also in school operations, culture and leadership. A whole-school approach goes beyond the school gates actively involving families, local communities and other partners.



## WHAT DOES A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY LOOK LIKE?

Some of the following activities will be visible in schools that adopt a whole-school approach to sustainability:



**Vision:** Include sustainability in key documents such as the school development plan or mission statement.

**Professional development:** Include sustainability as a regular agenda item in staff, leadership and student council meetings.



**Curriculum:** Integrate sustainability principles and practices into the curriculum, making connections to various subjects.



**Building and operations:** Green their outdoors spaces to encourage biodiversity.



**Community:** Invite parents or local experts to speak about green jobs or sustainable practices.

**Pedagogy and didactics:** Encourage hands-on, experiential learning experiences, both inside and outside the classroom.



## LIVING A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

If you are interested in a whole-school approach, a good place to start is to convene a school team to explore what it might look like in your school.

### Key questions that can help guide your conversations:



## IDEAS TO CONSIDER



**Align school values.** Reflect a sustainability commitment in school mission and policies.



**Collaborate with local organisations.** Invite experts and other schools locally and internationally for collective inquiry and action.



**Develop a whole-school plan.** Ensure input from students, staff, and community members.



**Make connections.** Integrate sustainability with other school priorities such as digital education, STEM, citizenship and well-being.



**Embed sustainability learning.** Integrate sustainability across the responsibilities of subject teachers and heads of departments as well as in extracurricular activities.



**Encourage student agency.** Offer opportunities for students to take responsibility and make decisions.





**Encourage distributed leadership.** Allow staff and community stakeholders to take ownership.



**Provide hands-on learning.** Encourage experiences that empower students to take action.



**Implement sustainable operations.** Encourage practices such as waste reduction or energy efficiency.



**Evaluate and improve.** Use school self-evaluation frameworks to support the learning journey as well as reinforce the value of sustainability efforts.



**Design sustainable spaces.** Create healthy, active learning environments that support student wellbeing.

## PROJECTS AND PRACTICE

- ★ **Ardsoil na Mara school** in **Ireland** adopts learning for sustainability as a whole-school mission. In [this video](#) you can learn about the different actions the school is taking to embed sustainability in different areas of school life.
- ★ **Progress** is an **Erasmus+** project devoted to advancing a whole-school approach to sustainability. It highlights how green agricultural schools attract students by aligning education with the growing needs of the green sector and the competences required for the circular economy.
- ★ **TERÄLAHTI** is a primary school in **Finland** that adopts a whole-school approach to sustainability focusing on the natural environment and embedding it throughout the learning experience.
- ★ **Sint-Paulusschool** is a kindergarten, nursery and primary school in **Kortrijk, Belgium**. In [this article and video](#) you can learn more about their climate-adaptive playground.

## CHALLENGES



*“Not everyone in the school is on the same page”*

**Meet people where they are.** Build inclusive teams, foster open discussions about sustainability and encourage collaboration across all levels.



*“Teachers need more peer learning opportunities and training”*

**Offer workshops,** learning exchange opportunities, and easy-to-use teaching resources to boost confidence and knowledge.



*“We don’t have enough funding or resources”*

**Tap into local community** support, grants and national programmes to find creative ways to implement sustainability initiatives.



*“Sustainability efforts feel overwhelming”*

**Start small.** Simple actions like waste reduction, outdoor learning, and student-led projects can build momentum over time.



*“Some staff and students may be resistant to change”*

**Highlight the real-world benefits** of sustainability learning, such as key life skills, healthier communities and more hopeful futures.



## RESOURCES

- ★ The [Eco-Schools](#) programme, run by the **Foundation for Environmental Education** is a well-established international programme active in 70+ countries. It provides schools with a seven-step framework to plan sustainability actions involving the whole-school community. Achievements can be recognised with the Green Flag award.
- ★ **UNESCO's [green school quality standard](#)** sets common criteria for schools committed to sustainability through a whole-institution approach. It is designed for accreditation scheme organisers, international associations and governments, providing recognition for schools' actions.
- ★ The [Leren voor Morgen Whole-School Approach](#) helps schools integrate sustainability across all aspects of school life - including curriculum, governance, operations, and community. Aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, this **Dutch organisation** offers practical tools, real-life examples and a flexible framework to support schools at different stages of their sustainability journey.
- ★ The [Greener Green Assessment Tool](#), developed as part of an **Erasmus+** project, helps primary schools evaluate and improve their sustainability practices across areas such as curriculum, management, participation, and the school environment. Based on the results, it offers recommendations, supporting schools to take concrete steps towards becoming greener and more sustainable.

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