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Collaboration and partnerships for sustainability:
Key messages



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1. Introduction

Partnerships play a crucial role in addressing the complex agenda of sustainability, which can be challenging for schools and policy makers to tackle on their own. By collaborating with partners such as local associations, NGOs, other schools and local businesses, schools can deepen and broaden the learning experience of pupils and students. Such partnerships can provide opportunities for community-based learning and a more practical, hands-on understanding of environmental issues. Students we spoke with during our meeting said that working with the local community (e.g., visiting a recycling plant, interviewing local fishermen, volunteering at local care home) not only helped them learn about sustainability in hands-on ways but also boosted their communication and collaboration skills.

2. Partnerships for sustainability - variety in formats and participants

Partnerships for sustainability can take various forms depending on the context and culture of the school or institution. There is no single correct approach, as every school is unique and requires tailored partnerships that align with its particular learning context and its reasons for partnering. In some cases, partnerships for sustainability are institutionally led, while in others, individuals take the lead within and between organisations and schools. Partnerships can be led by the school itself, e.g., with parents/parent associations, NGOs or other stakeholders from a local or national setting. These can be for short-term or longer-term engagements, depending on the goals and objectives of the partnership. Partnerships can involve collaboration (i) between teachers and/or students within a school, (ii) with parents and parent associations, (iii) with external partners from the local community and/or (iv) with an outside agency with a brief in the area of environmental/sustainability education, as in the case of Ireland with ECO-UNESCO.

Partnerships for sustainability may not always be found in the most obvious places. By embracing diverse approaches and involving various stakeholders, schools can enhance their efforts towards promoting sustainability and creating a positive impact in their communities. For instance, the *Cork Green Spaces* initiative involved working with religious orders to develop community gardens and with the Men's Shed Movement, a community-based organisation that promotes social connections and well-being.

3. Partnerships between education sectors

When education sectors form partnerships, the impact can be powerful. Sustainability education should be seen as a continuum, and links between different phases and stages of education are to be encouraged and supported. Secondary schools working with universities, for example, can foster a deeper understanding of environmental issues and also provide students with exposure to higher education options. Similarly, children in early childhood education and care or primary school learners can 'visit-up' (e.g., a local university or vocational education provider) to learn about environmental and sustainability issues. School clusters, where one school learns from another, can play a crucial role in promoting sustainability – such as through visits and exchanges between student eco-committees – and in promoting a shared vision for sustainable practices.

4. Benefits of partnerships for sustainability

Sustainability offers us a lens through which to see learning in a new way, build new connections, re-envision subjects and learning activities. Partnerships beyond the school setting can play a key role here. Benefits of partnerships include:

4.1 Educational

Innovative educational partnerships addressing sustainability offer an opportunity for student learning and engagement. By emphasising hands-on learning experiences, partnerships can help students build action competences and immerse themselves in less formal educational settings that encourage active participation and personal engagement, preparing students for the challenges of a changing world. Moreover, the benefits offered through such partnership experiences extend beyond sustainability, as they also enable students to develop better critical thinking, linguistic and communication skills through collaborative project work.

Hands-on projects led by environmental education agencies and organisations frequently enable students to appreciate and understand the environment and to feel connected to it. By bringing in experts from different fields, such as climate scientists, partnerships allow students to gain valuable insights and expand their horizons. Broadening the learning environment through activities like visiting local recycling plants provides real-life sustainability action within a local context and strengthens the relevance of what is being taught.

4.2 Social

School partnerships for sustainability can have a marked positive impact on student well-being, social connections, community engagement, intergenerational understanding, knowledge sharing and school reputation. They contribute to student well-being by addressing eco-anxiety and empowering students to take positive action – however small-scale or local – thus fostering a sense of empowerment. As we have seen in Kinsale Community School, partnerships can facilitate connections among like-minded students, creating a vibrant community and fostering friendships locally and regionally. They can also bridge the gap between the school and the community, such as through local action projects that benefit both parties (e.g., the Transition Town Kinsale project; <http://www.transitiontownkinsale.org/>). Partnerships involving student volunteering in care homes and other community settings such as Tidy-Towns (<https://www.kinsaletidytowns.ie/>) promote intergenerational learning and empathy, benefiting both students and their adult community.

Moreover, partnerships for sustainability facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and good practices, leading to collective learning and improvement. Of course, engaging in sustainability partnerships can also enhance the reputation and image of schools and their partners, showcasing their commitment to sustainability and community engagement. Partnerships also offer a form of recognition that is highly valued by non-school stakeholders – which in turn can motivate and encourage further cooperation.

4.3 Environmental

School sustainability partnerships can bring about significant environmental benefits to the school and its community. They contribute to the circular economy by finding solutions to local challenges. For example, the Kinsale Community School Cookbook promotes the use of local ingredients and sells in local shops, helping to reduce food miles and support the local economy.

Partnerships also offer concrete solutions to promote nature within the community, such as through tree and hedgerow planting projects by schools or the establishment of community gardens. By engaging in these activities, schools not only improve local green spaces but also foster a sense of environmental stewardship among students and the wider community. By engaging in partnerships that nurture the (re-)connection of people with nature and instil a sense of care for nature, particularly in urban settings, schools contribute to a collective mindset of protecting and preserving the environment for future generations.

5. Principles for successful partnerships

Shared vision, trust, shared values, clear communication, and defined roles: Building trust and successful relationships between partners is crucial. Assumptions and expectations that potential partners bring to the table need to be examined and discussed openly. Establishing a shared vision and common values – which requires negotiation and compromise – is key to developing an effective partnership. Clear expectations and defined roles are essential, along with a common goal and a clear language to ensure effective communication. Respectful and value-based communication, including active listening and clarity in all communications, is a key factor in maintaining strong partnerships.

Spreading the word and sharing successes: Utilising local and wider channels to publicise and celebrate activities helps to create awareness and inspire others to engage in similar initiatives. Social media can play a role here. The podcasts and resource-sharing we see at the centre of partnerships like the Irish Schools Sustainability Network (ISSN) are good examples of this (<https://www.issn.ie/>).

Financing is a key consideration: Certain project and partnership costs may be covered by a school, region or Ministry of Education, but additional financial support will almost inevitably be required. Government agencies, civil society and industry partners can be helpful here.

The added value of partnerships can extend well beyond the financial contribution, for example providing expertise, resources and training. We saw excellent examples of this such as ECO-UNESCO *Young Environmentalist* workshops (<https://ecounesco.ie/10-18-youth-programmes/environmental-workshops/>) and the *GreenSchools* Ireland movement (<https://greenschoolsireland.org/>).

Understanding the community of learners that the school is dealing with and the challenges they face: Active involvement of students and teachers, valuing their voices and aligning partnerships with the curriculum are key to this. This includes considering diverse nationalities and socio-economic backgrounds increasingly present in a school community. One way of addressing this is by systematically working to include all voices in the partnership discussion.

Active involvement of students: They are not passive players but important agents of change within the partnerships. Student voice and participation should be a core element, not only within the school but also within the wider community. Students can make real con-

tributions to local businesses and initiatives, and their voices should be valued and heard in the planning and decision-making processes.

Linking partnership activities and events to the curriculum: Partnerships that align with curriculum goals can enhance learning outcomes and support cross-curricular learning. By integrating partnership activities into the curriculum, schools can provide learners with a deeper understanding of sustainability and its relevance across various subjects.

6. Risks and challenges in partnerships

Risks and challenges for sustainability partnerships are both structural and ethical. Greenwashing could be a potential ethical challenge, particularly in partnerships with the private sector, where companies may – wittingly or unwittingly – propose projects and activities that engage in superficial sustainability efforts without genuine commitment or a longer-term vision. Relying heavily on one or two teachers for partnership coordination can create a vulnerability in case of personnel changes or burnout.

Partnerships require substantial effort and investment. They demand time, space and support to be effective. For instance, in Ireland's Transition Year, (the year between State examinations where students have more freedom to explore their interests), dedicated time and space are provided to explore projects and partnerships relating to environmental sustainability, just transition and climate action. Considering these enabling factors at the policy level and addressing implications for management and curriculum are crucial for successful implementation. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like the *World Wise* programme in Ireland (<https://www.worldwiseschools.ie/>) prioritise listening to students and teachers to address potential challenges and align their efforts effectively – this is an investment in time and respect for participants that can reward a partnership greatly.

Measuring the impact of partnerships can pose challenges. While small steps can make a difference, the true impact of many sustainability partnerships often manifests through a ripple effect and over a longer duration. For example, schools visiting community gardens – such as those developed by the *Cork Green Spaces for Health* Partnership (<https://corkhealthycities.com/greenspacesforhealth>) may be inspired to create their own gardens and polytunnels, leading to wider environmental initiatives – but this takes time to realise and so is not always readily assessed in terms of impact. And of course, the less immediately evident impact and outcomes of partnerships such as building student knowledge and skills for greener and more just living, require a longer-term perspective to fully observe and evaluate.

7. Additional support factors

Teacher networks and communities: The ISSN (<https://www.issn.ie/>) began as a bottom-up initiative to provide access to a network of like-minded peers and to facilitate collaborative learning for teaching about biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Its impact attracted not only the interest and support of Education and Training Boards (ETB) Ireland – a major facilitator of teacher professional development, nationally – but also that of a number of significant environment sector agencies and businesses. As a result, teachers can access a growing network of practice through the ETB, while centres benefit from the expertise and knowledge of teachers to run local and regional training courses that build curriculum collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Parents and families: They can help put and keep sustainability on the agenda at schools, contribute to sustainability actions and partnerships – such as Eco-Committees, link schools to wider community concerns and activities, and provide valuable resources and expertise to support sustainability initiatives. This short video recorded for the European Commission’s school education website describes the potential role of parents/carers in sustainability (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB7sJXz3Fs0>).

Collaboration with social partners and other key stakeholders: The ETUCE-EFEE Guidelines project – Reported in November 2022 – highlights the importance of collaboration between education trade unions and employer organisations. (See <https://shorturl.at/isyAY>). Initiatives such as the Education for Climate Coalition provide community engagement and resource spaces at a European level that may be particularly useful to teachers working in more isolated settings and contexts (<https://education-for-climate.ec.europa.eu/community/>). On a more global scale, organisations such as the UN *Sustainable Development Solutions Network* (SDSN) through its events and activities and particularly its SDG Academy (<https://sdgacademy.org/>), offers free and open access to educational resources from the world’s leading experts on sustainability and sustainable development generally.

Frameworks such as GreenSchools Ireland: These frameworks provide structures within which partnerships can thrive. They offer both a starting point and guidance for schools and their partners to collaborate effectively and also provide reference points for achievements and possible focuses for activities and events. On a more learning-directed note, the European Commission’s *GreenComp* framework (https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/greencomp-european-sustainability-competence-framework_en) provides a comprehensive framework against which to set the work of a sustainability project – in terms of its learning intentions and outcomes. Partnerships based on such reliable and agreed frameworks tend to be stronger – signalling the importance of organising and establishing such frameworks in advance and making them known more widely in the education sectors.

Award schemes and competitions: They can play a key role in empowering students. Partnerships that foreground student-led initiatives frequently allow learners to decide on topic or passion projects, explore them and present their findings in authentic settings. These schemes can serve as a steppingstone for further collaboration with partners, such as industry or local businesses, expanding the reach and impact of sustainability efforts of the school and the range of learning experiences available to its students. While competitions can be helpful, they should not dominate this space; collaboration and open schemes such as Ireland’s *GreenFlag Schools Awards* (www.antaisce.org), open to a whole school community and reflective of community efforts towards sustainability, are particularly to be welcomed.

8. What role for policy? (national/regional/local)

Guidance at national, regional and local levels: Policy action can provide toolkits, frameworks and templates that offer guidance and flexibility for schools to develop partnerships tailored to their specific context. These resources help schools navigate the partnership process more effectively and can help ensure alignment with sustainability goals and against useful developmental frameworks such as *GreenComp*.

Connecting schools with potential partners: By fostering collaboration between schools and external organisations, well-conceived, well-resourced policy initiatives can facilitate the formation of partnerships that bring together expertise, resources and shared goals. This can be achieved through platforms, networks or initiatives (including funding) that actively promote and facilitate partnership building and maintenance.

Amplify and communicate existing partnerships: Recognising and highlighting successful partnerships through awards and recognition programmes, as in Spain's practice of awarding Eco-Schools (www.ecoschools.global) in specific partnership categories, can serve as a powerful incentive and inspiration for other schools. Such validation efforts can showcase the benefits of partnerships and encourage their adoption by more schools.

By creating an enabling policy environment, ministries and regional governments can promote and foster a culture of collaboration and sustainability in education and in this way enable school level actions on collaborations and partnerships to reach beyond the traditional classroom and school settings to make connections that strengthen, deepen and enrich learning for sustainability

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