



# European Education Area Strategic Framework

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

### Supporting School Leadership for Sustainability: Key messages



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# **Supporting School Leadership for Sustainability**

Key Messages

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainability leadership requires vision for and commitment to a better world. It involves inspiring, guiding and motivating staff and students, creating opportunities for collaboration, and connecting diverse aspects of the school's activities so that the teaching, learning and practice of the school are joined up in their efforts to address sustainability.

The key messages outlined below arose from the discussions that took place on 8-9 December 2022 at the EU Working Group meeting on 'Supporting School Leadership for Sustainability'.

## 2. Challenges and obstacles

*Defining leadership roles for sustainability:* Many school leaders wrestle with understanding what sustainability leadership entails. Defining leadership roles is important as well as understanding the specific context leaders are attempting to influence in order to create learning opportunities for sustainability.

*Lack of support:* A key obstacle is the lack of professional support for school leaders and leadership teams. Many learning supports (courses, training material etc..) are limited to the technical implementation of particular schemes, such as eco-schools, and do not address change management. Professional support and training opportunities are needed on how to navigate the tensions and realities of creating change in schools.

*Building community:* Sustainability embraces every aspect of life and learning. This can be overwhelming for teachers and school leaders. Teachers often work in subject silos, and building boundary crossing opportunities and cohesion across teams is a challenge.

*Ownership:* Persuading school leaders to take ownership of this agenda can also be challenging as the responsibility is often passed on to a member of staff. A lack of experience or authority can mean that these activities result in a green 'dead-end' with little progress or impact on school sustainability. In addition, crucial areas for sustainability, such as buildings, equipment and infrastructure, might not be under the responsibility of school leaders but local, regional or national authorities.

*Courage to lead:* At present, many school leaders still lack the confidence to drive this agenda forward. Experience suggests that an innovative or 'daring' mindset as well as skills on how to manage change are also required to effectively overcome obstacles to a whole-school approach to sustainability.

*School leaders face conflicting agendas.* On a daily basis, school leaders face conflicting narratives or agendas. In sustainability, these may be underpinned by 'business as usual' vs 'circular economy' stances or calls for challenging 'over-consumption' vs promoting 'green purchases'. Support may also be needed to help school leaders juggle the multiple agendas they face, including student exam performance, addressing mental health concerns and providing equitable learning opportunities.

## 3. Key aspects of sustainability leadership

### 3.1. Values and ethics

*Ethics and moral purpose:* Effective sustainability leadership in schools is supported by a sense of moral purpose and ethical values as well as a commitment to protecting nature and building community cohesion. Leaders need the courage to change the culture in schools as sustainability can be an excellent driver for school improvement. They also need opportunities to experiment with sustainability.

*Values-based organisations:* Schools and school systems that are values-based serve as strong agents of change for sustainability. However, leadership in this area does not have to start from a values education stance - for example, a practical engagement activity at the school or in the community can lead to questioning and unpacking of values and life-style choices.

*Alignment with citizenship and democracy education:* Sustainability values align with other educational priorities such as citizenship, global education, democracy education and intercultural understanding. Leaders can effectively connect these educational perspectives to drive sustainability in schools through a systems approach.

### 3.2. Distributed leadership

*Everyone can be a leader:* Leadership for sustainability is not limited to school leaders but can be found everywhere in school and could be enhanced by the school leader. This distributed leadership model might require support mechanisms. In **Cyprus**, coaches and advisors support schools to develop their ESD action plans and objectives for a whole-school approach to leadership.

*Student voice and agency:* Students are the leaders of the future, and schools increasingly include the student voice through school governance as well as through academic and practical opportunities. In **France**, pupils are elected in each class of secondary schools as “eco-delegates”. They play an important role to raise awareness among all students and develop concrete projects with teachers and external partners. They are also representatives for sustainable development in various councils and bodies at school, regional or national level. In **Ireland**, Student Councils provide opportunity for students to voice their opinions. In **Portugal**, upper secondary schools have student representatives that belong to the school’s General Council and guide decisions and actions. In **Estonia** the school’s curriculum and its changes are submitted to the school’s board of trustees, the student council and the study council before being put into practice. In **Norway**, there is a pupils’ think tank that guides authorities and school leaders so that participation of students in school activities can be widened.

*Working together with the community:* Building a culture of collaboration across the school and with the local community is also key to effective sustainability leadership. It can help to avoid overwhelming school leaders as well as teachers. By cooperating with the wider community, non-formal educational opportunities can be made accessible to learners, parents, teachers and school leaders themselves. Collaboration with the community can include families, businesses, NGOs, local politicians, experts, other schools and universities. In **Austria**, the CoDeS network provides a platform for schools and the community to collaborate on sustainability issues. In **France**, ESD steering committees have been set

up at school level and regional level.

### 3.3. Professional development for school leaders

*Sustainability mindsets:* Training and educational development for headteachers and other school leaders should include opportunities for them to develop sustainability mindsets. Leaders also need opportunities to develop systemic approaches that enable interdisciplinary collaboration across the school. Having access to tools and guidance to perform self-assessment can support them in this process.

*Sustainability competences:* School leaders must have opportunities to develop competences associated with sustainability leadership which include: governance for sustainability, i.e. how to embed sustainability across the school; building motivation and empowerment of staff; creating opportunities for action projects or real-life learning; creating opportunities for greening the school and its environment; co-creating a school strategy for sustainability and translating policy guidance and documents into a local school context; collaborating with all school stakeholders and all education stakeholders outside of school to boost a whole-school approach and engage in distributed leadership. In **Hungary**, pedagogical centres support leadership for sustainability in schools in a number of these areas. In **France**, training schemes have been developed at national and regional levels.

*Outdoor experiences:* more opportunities are needed for school leaders to connect with nature and experience the outdoors as this can serve to boost engagement in sustainability. Mainstreaming outdoor learning in curricula and pedagogies as well as partnerships with NGOs or outdoor learning centres can be highly beneficial here.

*Mandatory vs optional courses:* Compulsory offerings for school leaders and other staff can also drive sustainability in schools. In **Cyprus**, school leaders undertake a 5-hour module on how to help staff embed sustainability in their work and an additional 5-hour module on how to overcome obstacles to implementation. **Sweden** also offers mandatory sustainability courses for school leaders which help them connect these concerns with innovations in digitalisation and the cultural diversity agenda. In **Romania**, there are optional courses in teacher training institutes that support headteachers in this area. In **Portugal**, virtual webinars are free and optional. In **France**, training courses for teachers and school leaders are compulsory for initial training and optional for continuing training.

## 4. Leadership entry points

*Build on what is happening already:* Starting with a particular focus and then transitioning to a whole-school-approach is a good way forward. Leading sustainability in schools usually starts by acknowledging what is already taking place and supporting reflective practice in this area. Such reflections often point to the lack of coherence across the school when it comes to sustainability. The process of creating a joint-up school response or planning based on the school's overall vision for sustainability can in itself serve as a steppingstone for a whole-school approach to sustainability.

*Creating a vision:* Helping create a vision for a sustainable school that staff, students and the school community own, is key to effective leadership for sustainability. Currently, schools often have a variety of unconnected initiatives taking place in discrete parts of the school.

*Sustainable Development Goals:* Leaders can use the 17 SDGs for engaging with sustainability, and many examples exist of how these can support practical work, serve as a compass for community engagement and lead to whole-school engagement. The SDGs are also a useful lens to capture how schools are already acting for sustainability. In **France**, top-level policy documents have linked sustainable development education with the UN's Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

*Micro-credentials:* Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences and offer a flexible, targeted way that can help teachers, school leaders and authorities develop competences for teaching and practicing sustainability. Having the necessary support and time is critical so that these opportunities are used in the most beneficial way while maintaining the wellbeing of school leaders, teachers and staff working in authorities.

*Critical mass is needed:* Defining roles such as 'sustainability coordinator' can be helpful to advance sustainability in a school. However, experiences suggest that a small group of people leading on this agenda is more effective than having a single person identified with the responsibility. Having clear and unwavering support for this team from the school leader(s) is also important. The Working Group visited a school in **Hungary** where a committee consisting of ten staff members successfully led the agenda across the school with the support of the school leader. In **France**, school leaders are invited by the Ministry of Education to appoint a coordinator who leads an ESD steering committee at school.

*Reforming governance:* At a national level, reviews and reforms of governance provide opportunities for leadership for sustainability. This issue is also linked with appropriate public funding to schools so school leaders can implement changes within their school communities. In the **French-speaking community of Belgium**, a recent school governance reform meant that school leaders and senior management teams drew up fresh strategic objectives for each school which in turn were approved by the regional authority. Schools were encouraged to consider sustainability in these reviews.

*Extending leadership:* There are examples of where EU countries are providing leadership for sustainability in schools through their aid and development programmes such as **France**. The French Ministry of Education supports the Office for Climate Education, recognised as UNESCO Centre, which brings aid to non-EU countries in capacity building for ESD. One example is a secondary school in France and a school in Rwanda which work together on sustainability based on the SDGs. This work also serves to develop French language competences applied to sustainable development across Rwandan schools. The French Ministry of Education is currently working in partnership with the French Agency for Development to promote and gather good examples of ESD education from non-EU countries.

*Storytelling:* Storytelling can help us understand sustainability meaningfully and also engage students who can connect the stories to their own experiences and to the communities to which they belong.

*Empowering teachers:* Effective leadership involves finding ways of supporting and empowering teachers to engage with sustainability. Accreditation and opportunities to diversify the career path can be an important motivator. Allocating time for professional development is also an important catalyst as well as providing incentives and opportunities for distributed leadership.

*Intergenerational and indigenous perspectives:* Intergenerational perspectives and learning from indigenous peoples and cultures can help build motivation and pathways to leadership for sustainability.

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