



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability

Student engagement and action in learning for sustainability: key messages



Student engagement and action in learning for sustainability

Key messages

1. Introduction

Members of the European Commission's Working Group Schools: Learning for Sustainability held a Peer Learning Activity on student participation and action in Paris on 6-8 December 2023. The meeting was hosted by the French Ministry of Education and Youth.

The focus was on learners in the context of school education, from nursery through to upper secondary school. An input paperⁱ was sent to participants by the European Commission prior to the meeting. The meeting offered opportunities to exchange experiences and reflect upon educational policies, learning programmes and pedagogical approaches related to student engagement and action for sustainability.

The French Ministry of Education and Youth presented how learning for sustainability is organised and steered in France, with a focus on the participation of students, notably through France's eco-delegates programme. Implementation at regional level was presented by the Paris education authorities and an exchange was held with eco-delegate students from national and regional level. Field visits were held to two upper secondary schools in central Paris (Lycée Hélène Boucher and Lycée Maurice Ravel) with presentations and discussions with students and teachers. Students and teachers from Collège Courteline and Collège Rouault (lower secondary education) and Lycée Marcel Deprez (vocational upper secondary education) also joined to share their experiences.

Examples from other countries presented during the meeting included:

- **The School Garden Contest, Croatia:** In its 25th year, this well-known project encourages schools from kindergarten to middle school to establish and maintain school gardens. Students take on the responsibility of caring for these gardens, which fosters a sense of ownership.
- **youpaN - Youth Panel on Education for Sustainable Development, Germany,** is the official body through which youth participate in the ESD national implementation programme. youpaN is a panel made up of 30 young people aged 16 to 27 of various backgrounds and are determined by a youth jury. Members of youpaN participate in all six national ESD-fora and youpaN sends one representative to the National Platform on ESD. youpaN also develops its own demands and statements
- **In Czechia and Slovenia** approaches include also issues of health, well-being and active citizenship; the revision of the curriculum has been done with the active participation of students, including contributions on integrating sustainability.
- **Kinsale Community School, Ireland,** presented a range of student-led green school projects with a strong overall emphasis by the school on authentic student participation that then shapes school policy ('from voice to influence').

The policy messages outlined below are drawn from discussions at the meeting and are organised under headings that relate to the main themes identified by group members.

2. Understanding student participation

- Student involvement is often limited to consultation without giving students real influence over decisions. Tokenistic or superficial practices fail to be inclusive, lack meaningful involvement, and do not give students control over their participation.
- Genuine participation means students are fully committed and actively involved in decision-making, especially on matters that affect them at school. It involves engaging young people in projects and processes, recognising their role as essential contributors who help guide and carry out the work.

3. Different ages and settings

- Active participation of pupils and students at school is possible and necessary at every phase of education, from early years to upper secondary. This can take many forms and can be formal, such as student councils and eco committees, and informal, for example climate clubs and other sustainability-related after-school clubs.
- Inclusive participation is key as students are heterogenous and diverse in gender, faith and socio-economic backgrounds and can include young people living with disabilities.
- Participation in climate, environmental and sustainability actions (including issues of social justice and active citizenship) can take place in different settings from classroom, to whole school, national, European and international.
- Young people also demonstrate personal commitment outside of their school context (e.g. involvement in NGOs, student activism, advocacy in national parliaments, involvement in international-level meetings, such as UN CoP meetings etc.).

4. Enhancing participation in school settings

- Activities fostering youth voice can empower pupils and students to shape and articulate their perspectives, thus initiating positive changes in their lives and communities.
- Encouraging students to take initiative enhances their learning, particularly through student-led activities. Suggesting, planning and carrying out an activity which leads to a change, however small, can give young people a sense of ownership, agency and satisfaction.
- It is important to create a safe and open space for honest communication. Allowing students to express themselves independently, without constant adult supervision,

builds confidence and encourages active participation. Providing students with designated spaces that enable participation and active engagement at school is crucial.

- Active engagement can help in preventing and tackling eco-anxiety, countering feelings of helplessness and despair as well as indifference towards environmental issues as students are motivated to get involved in practical, tangible projects.
- Ensuring continuation over time is key. In the case of the eco-delegates programme in France, building on past experiences (i.e. in the previous school year) is a valuable resource for shaping future actions. It is important to pass knowledge and experience on to other students for sustained impact.

5. Building student competences through action

- Engaging students in climate and sustainability issues can help develop critical thinking and political awareness and agency, empowering them to become active members of their community. It also offers valuable hands-on learning experiences. Encouraging student involvement in daily school life, starting from early education, enhances the learning process and fosters their participation.
- Involving students in projects that connect different subjects and disciplines can provide new ways of looking at climate and sustainability and can foster creativity. It can also help students to better understand the interconnections between different subject areas and contribute to learning about the environment, climate change and sustainability in families.
- Competences gained through participation include systems thinking, action and citizenship skills, as well as communication, collaboration and digital skills (e.g. Young Reporters for the Environment scheme where young people also learn to create videos, podcasts etc.).
- The competences gained by students through action can be usefully linked to a competence framework, such as the European GreenComp framework, or national competence frameworks, such as the Education for Sustainable Development framework in France, released in September 2023.

6. Communicating and demonstrating student engagement

- The voices of young advocates can motivate others to take action and influence decision-makers, leading to changes in policies, approaches or priorities. This engagement starts at school level where students can participate in various sustainability projects and have a space to express themselves.

- To better foster youth engagement and participation opportunities, a comprehensive approach is necessary. Sharing information through organised structures within schools (e.g. eco-committees) and events like sustainability weeks and festivals can effectively showcase results and convince more young people to act for sustainability.
- It is important to communicate not only within but also beyond the school, extending to the broader society. Emphasising this connection will ensure that everyone is actively engaged and on board, fostering a collaborative relationship between schools and the community. Awarding labels to school is a way of recognising action and commitment, for example the E3D scheme (*école Engagée en Démarche de Développement Durable*) in France.

7. Youth inclusion in decision-making at national level

- The inclusion of youth voices in decision-making bodies and committees can be achieved through establishing youth councils and advisory boards within ministries, a practice observed in various countries. In France, a national council (*Conseil National de la Vie Lycéenne*) was set up gathering representatives of students from upper secondary schools, including two eco-delegate representatives. The Youth Panel on Education for Sustainable Development, Germany (youpaN) represents the views of young people in national decision making on ESD.
- The transition from mere consultation to *active participation* is fundamental. For continuity and accountability, it is essential to ensure the *implementation* of the proposals put forward by young people.
- Making sure that young people know about and can access the opportunities open to them is vital. Public authorities can play a key role in mapping and communicating the opportunities available.

8. Supporting teachers and school leaders

- Support for new teaching and learning approaches is crucial if opportunities are to be created for students to participate in meaningful ways. This requires teacher education and support to develop the confidence and abilities to engage young people actively in sustainability. Acknowledging and addressing the challenges teachers face, including time constraints, is important.
- Where it is not yet the case, including sustainability into the curriculum allows for dedicated time during school hours, even if some activities (specific pedagogical projects, extra curricular activities) may also take place outside of regular school hours.
- Support by school leadership is key for the success of sustainability activities. Effective school leadership extends beyond formal roles, emphasising a collective sense among the staff that they can initiate and develop projects related to sustainability. It is

important to integrate sustainability in the functioning of the school as a whole. The E3D school labelling developed in France takes such an approach.

9. Involving outside partners

- Non-governmental organisations and other agencies can be key in providing engaging classroom materials and resources. For example, the Climate Academy in Paris contributes to training eco-delegates and offers a space for workshops for students. The French Ministry of Education and Youth develops partnerships at national level with a wide range of NGOs. Two presented during the meeting included:
 - the Tara Ocean Foundation which provides rich and engaging educational materials on oceans in the field of science education;
 - the Office for Climate Education which provides high-quality scientific and educational resources on climate change for teachers.
- More broadly, interministerial cooperation is vital. In France partnerships are developed with ministries responsible for the environment, energy, agriculture, employment, foreign affairs, etc., as well as with public agencies.

10. Involvement of decision-makers

- Political will is vital to support student action in learning for sustainability and to achieve a joined-up approach which involves curricula, teacher professional development and support for concrete actions at school level. For this reason, in France, the Ministry of Youth and Education adopted in June 2023 a new ministerial action plan “School: first place of commitment to the ecological transition” which includes 20 measures.
- It is also important to define coordinators at all levels. In France, a steering person/group is designated at the level of each school, at the level of regional education authorities (académies), and at the national level in the Ministry of Education and Youth.
- The quality of the dialogue between the various players is crucial, and the extent to which the various recommendations are taken on board is a sign of the effectiveness of such dialogue and exchange.

11. Engagement in practice

- **Eco-delegates programme (France):** Since 2020, around 250,000 students are elected every school year as eco-delegates (*éco-délégués*) across all secondary school and upper secondary schools classes in France. Eco-delegates play a crucial role in raising awareness and motivating their peers to take action for the environment. They identify areas for improvement within the school, collaborating with various stakeholders. Eco-

delegates undergo training and receive ongoing support, with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals.

The emphasis is on empowering students through a bottom-up approach, allowing them to explore various topics. This approach not only fosters awareness but also encourages active involvement in different areas. Eco-delegates develop concrete projects: to sort canteen waste, promote sustainable choices in clothing or transportation, green the school's outdoor spaces or use rainwater recovery from school roof. A national award was created in 2021 to support and showcase the best actions.

For example, the eco-delegates from the Lycée Hélène Boucher took part in a series of scientific workshops and developed their role as ambassadors for other students. Further activities include promoting cleaner transportation, raising awareness of other students of climate change using the Climate Fresk (*Fresque du Climat*) improving their carbon footprint as part of an Erasmus+ project (*Projet Etablissements Bas Carbone, Clicks On project*). The eco-delegates students from the vocational Lycée Marcel Deprez have installed beehives on the school rooftop with remote monitoring systems which they have developed: the project combines digital components and hands-on experience. In the Collège Rouault eco-delegates are cultivating a pedagogical garden using techniques which respect the environment.

Educational natural areas/*Aires éducatives* (France)

This educational programme is being developed by the French Ministry of Education and Youth and the French Agency for Biodiversity. An educational area (*aire éducative*) is a small natural space near the school. The students study this space and its evolution. Together they formulate proposals to preserve the area and directly participate in the decision-making process.

ⁱ Tilbury, D. (2023) *Student voices, engagement and action in learning for sustainability* Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability Input paper
<https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/Learning+for+Sustainability?preview=/44165726/113902097/Input%20Paper%20-%20Youth%20Voice%20Engagement%20and%20Participation.pdf>