



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability

Policy Brief 1

Effective Policy Design in Learning for Sustainability



Context

This document presents a summary of effective policy design measures and practices identified at a workshop of the European Commission's Working Group Schools: Learning for Sustainability that took place at the World Environmental Education Congress (WEEC) in Prague on 16 March 2022. The hybrid event was open to members of the working group (who joined in-person and online) as well as WEEC participants in Prague.

The policy brief has been informed by a presentation from the European Commission at the start of the workshop which gave an overview of the policy landscape in the EU regarding learning for sustainability. A panel discussion with working group representatives from Czech Republic, Cyprus and Hungary as well as small group work engaged members and participants from the WEEC in refining and extending the core messages arising out of this initial presentation. The workshop centred on what constituted good policy design as well as how to ensure this is translated into effective implementation

- **Q. What is the impulse for this policy brief?** The Working Group on Learning for Sustainability meets regularly to discuss and exchange ideas and good practice on integrating sustainability in education systems. Effective policy design is one of the focus topics selected by the group.
- **Q. What do we mean by policy?** This brief interprets policy as a governmental action (whether at local, regional or national level) which seeks to address an identified issue or to initiate improvement in a specific area.
- **Q. Who contributed to the development of this brief?** Working Group members composed of government representatives as well as social partners, representatives of NGOs and international bodies. Participants from the World Environmental Education Congress also joined the workshop.

Where are we at?

- A recent study by the European Commission provided a snapshot of the **policy landscape** across Europe noting that almost all EU Member States have strategic policy documents or actions plans related to learning for sustainability (European Commission, 2022). Fewer countries, however, refer to education in other strategic documents related to sustainability. The study also found that there are significant gaps in policies and frameworks for early childhood and care, as well as higher education compared with primary and secondary levels.
- Evidence suggests that **teacher education** is often lagging behind and failing to keep up with institutional or curriculum change. Few countries emphasise interdisciplinary or **transversal skills** in learning for sustainability.
- **Core themes** associated with learning for sustainability across the primary and secondary curriculum include: biodiversity and ecosystem protections; renewable energy; water, air and soil pollution; carbon footprints and the conservation of the natural environment.
- **Policy intentions vs classroom practice:** National and regional curricula specify the 'what' often leaving space for teachers to determine 'how' learning is to take place. There is a risk that some essential pedagogical experiences may be absent from learning especially in the early years. Although many teachers recognise the

value of interdisciplinary and whole-school approaches, implementation is proving difficult.

- **Policy development and coordination:** Education for Sustainable Development is a cross cutting issue requiring agencies, education bodies and leaders to come together to align learning for sustainability. The lack of alignment across the education system or school can explain why whole-school or institutional approaches are proving difficult. The fine detail of implementation is often absent and policy makers are often lacking the time or remit to oversee strategies or plans being implemented.

What has worked?

- Well-defined policies based on a **clear vision** are key. To be effective, policies need to address not only with the 'what' but also the 'why' and the 'how' of learning.
- When policy planning for curricula, resources, assessment and teaching are **aligned**, implementation is more effective.
- **Collaboration** with civil society, the private sector, and academia is important to create policy and strategies that work on the ground. Including key stakeholders early on in the policy process has long-term benefits. We need to explore where and how learning for sustainability can happen. All sorts of players and organisations can potentially be part of this.
- Where it has occurred, the integration of learning into all **policy documents** relating to environmental sustainability has strengthened implementation.
- **Strong collaboration with municipalities in countries** with multi-level jurisdictions for education (e.g. Norway and Germany) has deepened implementation.
- Engaging the **youth in policy development and implementation** is increasingly seen as important given the intergenerational fairness principle embedded in sustainability.
- **Partnerships with NGOs** are critical; they are key players in the implementation phase but engagement must start early and when plans are being developed. The potential of NGOs is sometimes undervalued by the formal education sector. Game-changers can accelerate implementation. Teacher training to improve the ability and confidence around ecological, environmental and sustainability learning can be a game changer. Other game changers include: the use of competence frameworks; monitoring and evaluation; NGO partnerships; learning from other cross-curricular learning efforts (e.g. democratic education); aligning with international programmes (e.g. Eco-schools).

Game Changers

- In **Flanders**, sustainability is embedded in the curricula through a competence framework – putting emphasis on transformative education. Focus groups of teachers are used to monitor progress and collect relevant information to assess against the European competence' framework.
- In **Hungary**, 20 schools established a network on whole school sustainability more than two decades ago. The ministry saw the potential and invested in coordinating the network. Now one third of schools in Hungary are involved and there is a parallel network for kindergartens.
- In **Germany**, a **monitoring team** has been established to identify **indicators** for measuring success in schools. These are included in the national sustainable strategies;
- In **Norway**, much has been gained by **aligning with other similar learning areas** such as democratic education; a lot of sharing of good practices have occurred through similar networks.
- In **Slovenia**, **NGO partnerships** are assisting with capacity building and advancing experiences on outdoor education.
- In **Greece**, sustainability coordinators at the district level act as a bridge between policy-makers and schools. Coordinators understand the practical needs of schools and can feed this to policy level.
- Many **EU countries** have adopted **eco-schools programmes and frameworks** which help to guide implementation and assess progress.

How do we know it has worked?

- Specific **targets and actions** should be defined to ensure progress can be monitored. This should be achieved through a co-creation process to ensure ownership and relevance.
- Involving **stakeholders in the evaluation** process is important as is identifying learning outcomes for learning for sustainability.
- Given that monitoring and evaluation of learning for sustainability at the national level is in the early stages, **research can help** define progress and identify what is worth monitoring.

What challenges remain?

- There is an increasing understanding of the importance of the learning for sustainability agenda, however actual implementation is challenging due to competing policy demands and **lack of understanding** of education thinking and practice that supports this area of learning.
- Learning for sustainability in schools takes time to develop and implementation is sporadic in some countries. **Integrated implementation needs both time and culture change.**

- Ministries need **sufficient capacity and resources** as policy makers often have many, sometimes unrelated tasks and topics to juggle. In some countries, sustainability education is still not considered priority.
- **Collaboration with stakeholders is vital.** There is a need to listen to diverse voices, from different groups, even if they seem critical. This is vital for reflection, innovation and meaningful change.
- Strengthen teachers capacity by **supporting them where they are now**, i.e., how can sustainability be embedded into their context, subject and learning outcomes. Platforms can help share ideas, experience and connect educators.
- Going forward **structural changes** are needed, e.g., enabling cross-curricular, less subject-specific focus, develop initial and continuous teacher professional development.
- Frameworks and tools on sustainability can support effective policy implementation. But these also need to be reviewed and improved on a regular basis. Critical reflection of these support measures and tools is vital.
- Research and policy cannot be seen in isolation. We need a serious dialogue on how **research can inform policy-making**. Currently we are not using research enough in learning for sustainability. Data and evidence are needed to inform policy but qualitative research can add a lot of value and is not widely accepted in ESD/learning for sustainability.

What have we learnt?

- Education policy environments are shifting and becoming more complex as stakeholders become increasingly involved in design and implementation and some educational responsibilities have become more devolved.
- Effective policy design involves smart design (vision, policy tools and resources), inclusive stakeholder engagement (transparency, involvement and communication) and a conducive environment (institutional, capacity and policy alignment).
- Much has been learnt over the years about effective policy making and implementation in other areas of learning or sectors that could be relevant to learning for sustainability.
- Experience of learning during the pandemic has resulted in questions about the fundamentals of education. Parents also starting to consider different approaches in education. There is now a window of opportunity for change. ESD/learning for sustainability requires innovative methods and approaches so it can potentially be a vehicle for these new innovative approaches.
- Long-term and shared vision is necessary that can be sustained over election cycles. Interdepartmental/inter-ministerial dialogue (e.g. between education and environment ministers) is vital and should be strengthened. Such dialogue can help reach a common understanding of what we mean with ESD and learning for sustainability.
- Clearly defined frameworks for assessing sustainability education are lacking.
- Coordination among key stakeholders can be difficult but is an important element for success
- Collaboration beyond schools is vital, especially involving the non-formal sector; however that requires support on both sides.

References

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Education for environmental sustainability (2022): policies and approaches in European Union Member States : final report. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/39>

For more information about the European Commission's work on Learning for Sustainability see: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/green-education/learning-for-environmental-sustainability>

