



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability

Input Paper:

**Collaboration, Partnership and Whole School
Approaches: Key questions and challenges**



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This paper was prepared by Conor Galvin as input for the meeting of the EU Working Group on schools: Learning for Sustainability on 5th and 6th May 2022. 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>

1.1 Introduction

The EU Working Group on *Learning for Sustainability* is exploring how policy can assist school level actions around cross-sector collaboration and successful partnerships. This paper brings forward input on how learning for environmental sustainability can be strengthened by such actions and also summarises some of the key challenges that need to be addressed for cross-sector collaboration and partnerships to make an impact.

This input paper, to be discussed by the working group at their meeting on 5-6 May 2022,; i) introduces the terms cross-sector collaboration and partnership in relation to learning for sustainability; and ii) sets out some key considerations arising from research and the documented experiences of schools in this. It closes with a number of considerations for those involved in shaping, designing and/or implementing policy. The purpose of this paper is to encourage better understanding of the challenges of cross-sectoral partnerships and the fragility of programmes that depend on goodwill and enthusiasm alone.

1.2 Cross-sector collaboration and partnerships – rationale and examples

Climate change and environmental degradation are complex issues, whether on a local, national or international scale. Despite the multifaceted challenge, all too often we approach these issues with siloed solutions that are not sufficient to address the problems at the scale at which they exist. Successful outcomes from addressing these ‘wicked problems’ increasingly depend on the coordinated actions of decision-makers and actors at different levels and require simultaneous action from different professional fields. This is where cross-sector collaboration and partnerships come into play, as such collaboration can help develop a more holistic view on sustainability among learners, and can help lay the groundwork for them to think in cross-disciplinary solutions in their future work.

The potential of cross-sector collaborations builds on the recognition that the most robust and sustainable solutions will come from designing with (and not just for) the community involved. Such an approach can move beyond impacting individuals to impacting *entire communities* for more sustainable knowledge and lifestyles. Nature-based projects such as cleaning a river can help to increase social inclusion and empower communities in a collaborative way.

The learning possibilities for such partnerships when schools become involved are promising and can include long-term opportunities for the transformation of both urban and rural communities (Wheeler, Guevara, and Smith, 2018) as well as developing environmentally competent young people who are “consciously solution-orientated” (Rathzel & Uzzell 2009, p. 273).

Support for cross-sector collaboration and partnerships in the educational sector can be seen in parallel with the increasingly popular notion of ‘whole institution approaches’, where educational institutions involve not only their own teaching staff but also environmental practitioners in order to relate sustainability not only to research but also to outreach activities (Mehling et al, 2019; Glackin et al, 2018). Whole institution approaches as well as cross-sector collaboration and partnerships sees the role of schools and educational institutions as going beyond simply knowledge building, to providing learners with skills, values and knowledge need to live *full lives*. They also invite educational institutions to focus not only on teaching content about sustainable development, but also on participating in sustainable development practices, including taking action to reduce the institution’s ecological footprint, promoting community-focused action, and advocating for green futures. Collaboration between the learning and training institution and the local community is therefore important in that it promotes opportunity for individual and collective engagement (UNESCO, 2021; Kohl et al, 2021).

For Member States, a wide range of support mechanisms and encouragements can be helpful in supporting cross-sector collaboration and partnerships in learning for sustainability. This includes building collaborative networks and platforms for networking for stakeholders, encouragement of the

non-formal education sector to engage in collaborations and partnerships, and providing funding for such collaboration and partnerships. It also extends to supporting teachers, educators and school leaders in building and supporting such partnerships, incorporating collaboration and partnerships in the curriculum, and the development of national strategies and targets.

Additionally, a dedicated strand under the Erasmus+ programme fosters cooperation among organisations and institutions and several projects have had a strong focus on cross-sector collaboration as a way to strengthen education for environmental sustainability.

Cross-sector collaboration and partnership is about utilising the roles, knowledge and responsibilities of multiple public, private and non-profit actors to reach innovative solutions and results, which could otherwise not be obtained. Two examples may help showcase the potential in cross-sector collaboration and partnerships:

Under Erasmus+ Key Action 2, **the ECORoad project** brought together four primary schools which teamed up to implement a whole-school approach to Education for Sustainable Development at their school. Each school also had a local specialist partner for supporting the schools' work and to help the school network with other actors in their local community. Success factors for a meaningful partnership included dedicated and knowledgeable partners, who all had previous but different experiences with education for environmental sustainability, as well as collaboration with local actors, that brought students out of the classroom, new experiences in nature and made them role models in their community for more sustainable lifestyles, spreading the impact of education for environmental sustainability beyond the students and teachers involved (EcoRoad, 2018). An example of direct collaboration between students and the local community in the project, was an activity in Iceland, where student produced reusable bags for customers at a local grocery store and taught the customers the benefits of recycling.

ECO-UNESCO Ireland is a non-profit organisation providing practical environmental education services and support to young people, youth groups, schools and interested individuals.ⁱ It specialises in environmental education and environmental youth work and places particular emphasis on the power and possibility of collaboration within and between schools and with their local community. Typical of this would be The **Rebel Green project** (2021-22) run by a group of secondary school students in Cork, Ireland which involved 'Young Reducers' coming together to support local farm produce, local ethically made products, and other local groups working for environmental awareness and change in their community. This project involved 'hands-on' community focused environmental action in partnership with an eco-UNESCO 'adviser' and included setting up a website and using social media and local papers. Through this the young people involved emphasised the benefits of shopping locally and buying in-season and the cost of transporting products from abroad and the impact on the environment.ⁱⁱ

1.3 Challenges and barriers

There is agreement in the academic and practitioner literature that a number of key challenges need to be addressed for schools to build successful partnerships and collaborations that underpin effective partnerships and collaborations that go beyond the fragility of programmes that depend on goodwill and enthusiasm alone.

This section considers four of these:

1. **The single champion:** A key challenge with cross-sector and inter-school collaboration and partnerships in the educational sector is that these often rely on one single, dedicated teacher or individual who works in addition to their normal working hours to make the collaboration and partnership function. This may bring initial coherence and energy to the project but can also render the project unsustainable and fragile in the longer term. If the motivated individual burns out or moves on, the project often cannot continue in the same way as before. To make cross-sector collaboration and partnership project more sustainable for schools and other educational institutes, work that supports a more team-based approach to environmental education collaborations and programmes would help address this weakness. Additionally teachers and teams working on sustainability initiatives need to get support from the institution's leadership and if possible be viewed as one of the central missions of the school and integrated at organisational level (Mogren, Gericke & Scherp, 2019).
2. **Set and inflexible curricula.** In many Member States the curriculum is set and does not always provide enough flexibility to include cross-sector collaboration and partnership projects. So while schools often recognise collaboration and partnerships as a way to give learners first-hand experiences outside the classroom and as a way to develop collaborative and innovative skills – the 'labs' approach to learning (Schäpke et al 2018) – they can be inhibited in mainstreaming such opportunities. In many cases, teachers as well as learners need to use time outside the normal school day to participate in such partnerships, which can limit the number of projects and participants possible. Additionally, the confidence and the skills to engage in cross-sector collaborations can be lacking when the curriculum is set at national or regional level and teachers are not used to having the freedom or flexibility to adjust the curriculum taught or the pedagogical methods used. Both teachers and educational institute leaders need to be trained and supported in how to build effective and enduring partnerships and encouraged and recognised for their efforts. Award schemes such as those associated with eTwinning and the ECO-Schools movement (<https://www.ecoschools.global/>) as well as those supported by local leaders and national agencies can motivate efforts for cross-sector collaboration and partnerships.
3. **Finding the right partners.** For schools seeking cross-sector collaboration and partnerships another key challenge is how to find and connect with the right partners. Project success is largely determined by finding partners that will put in the necessary work, have the right level of knowledge and experience with education for environmental sustainability, and collectively can bring to the project the necessary resources (human, time, knowledge and/or financial). Many educators may not have a wide network outside their own institution or field of expertise to

identify such partners, which can make it a challenge to find interested parties with which to collaborate. The recently launched EU *Education for Climate Coalition* platform may help at a European level.ⁱⁱⁱ The Coalition is positioned as a European participatory community for students, teachers and education stakeholders to act collectively on innovative education solutions for sustainability. It is currently in the process of developing a suite of ‘challenges’ and other activities that support teachers, bridge education with science, develop green skills and competences, raise awareness, and change behaviours (Education for Climate Coalition, 2021). Activities like this can help by providing both a platform through which interested teachers and other potential cross-sectoral partners can connect and all offer a starting point that enables common goals, a meaningful way to work together and a common purpose for the collaboration or partnership.

4. **Funding.** Another key challenge for successful cross-sector collaboration and partnership is finding sources for funding. Partners in cross-sector collaboration and partnerships will often need to put in an investment themselves, which can be hard for limited school budgets. Likewise, funding possibilities for non-formal educational partners and knowledge of such funding schemes may be limited. Access to free to use learning platforms such as the School Education Gateway – soon to relaunch as the European School Education Platform - and the types of learning events and related opportunities for capacity building can go some way towards addressing the costs involved for a school to become engaged in partnerships and collaborations. Additionally, the current generation of ERASMUS+ calls can provide funded opportunities for schools to become involved in – and in some instances lead – partnerships under the heading of *Partnerships for Cooperation* (which are transnational projects designed to develop and share innovative practices and promote cooperation, peer learning, and exchanges of experiences in the fields of education, training, and youth (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2022)^{iv}.

1.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, cross-sector collaboration and partnerships hold great potential for schools in their work to help prepare learners with the capabilities and understanding needed to address environmental sustainability, which requires the capacity to lead and work collaboratively and to effectively work across conventional discipline and sectoral boundaries. Cross-sector collaboration and partnerships gives learners the possibility to experience and test their skills with real-life problems and so foster a more holistic view on environmental sustainability.

The great benefits and potential of cross-sector collaboration and partnerships however also present a number of significant policy challenges: The curricula of schools may need to be opened up to allow for such partnerships in an otherwise tightly planned system. Likewise, teachers and educational institution leaders need to be educated and trained in how to work with and support cross-sector collaboration and partnerships.

Of course, some educators also adopt a critical stance towards cross-sector partnerships and argue that through engaging more in so-called collaborative projects across sectors, public organisations such as universities and schools could face the danger of being undermined and 'colonised' by certain social interests and economic or political power (Calhoun, 2006; Marginson, 2006). This is a real concern for those who hold such views and must be addressed if the full great benefits and potential of cross-sector collaboration and partnerships are to be realised.

EU and Member States can help support cross-sector collaboration and partnerships by placing focus on the topic, engaging, inspiring, and bringing together relevant national stakeholders, commissioning research, providing local and EU wide platforms for stakeholders (schools, teachers, educational institute leaders, local, regional and national policy makers) to connect and inform each other and by providing funding that reflects the need to engage educators at all levels with the challenges and opportunities of learning and teaching for sustainability, and valorises the role that a whole-school approach brings to the challenge of providing effective and meaningful green education.

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1.6 Notes

ⁱ See <https://ecounesco.ie/>

ⁱⁱ See <http://daviscollege.ie/page/Green-Schools/60038/Index.html> for more.

ⁱⁱⁱ See https://education-for-climate.ec.europa.eu/_en

^{iv} See https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/2022-erasmusplus-programme-guide-v2_en_0.pdf