



US PARTNERSHIP

DECADE OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
UNITED NATIONS DECADE (2005-2014)

EDUCATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

By K-12 and Teacher Education Sector of the U.S. Partnership

"This represents a new vision of education, a vision that helps people of all ages better understand the world in which they live, addressing the complexity and interconnectedness of problems such as poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, health, conflict and the violation of human rights that threaten our future. This vision of education emphasizes a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to developing the knowledge and skills needed for a sustainable future as well as changes in values, behavior, and lifestyles. This requires us to reorient education systems, policies and practices in order to empower everyone, young and old, to make decisions and act in culturally appropriate and locally relevant ways to redress the problems that threaten our common future."

*~ Excerpt from the Draft Framework for an International Implementation Scheme
United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)*

What is Education for Sustainability?

The United Nations declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) to promote the local and global acceptance of principles of "sustainable development". But what is Education for Sustainable Development, also referred to as Education for Sustainability? The 21st century calls upon us to prepare students to be active citizens in a complex and ever-changing world. Education for Sustainability is a framework that can be used to engage students in all subjects by using the real-world context of the complex interconnections between the creation of vibrant communities, strong economies, and healthy ecosystems, both locally and globally. It provides useful context for instruction in all areas, including social studies, language arts, math, and science, and promotes the development of important 21st century skills such as critical and creative thinking, systems thinking, collaboration, and communication.

In Education for Sustainability (EfS) we define sustainability as "meeting human needs today in such a way that future generations can meet their own needs". This definition is from a United Nations commission document called *Our Common Future* (also known as The Brundtland Report), published in 1987. Simple, yet clear, this definition has served as the foundation for EfS efforts around the world. Education for Sustainability (EfS) is a combination of content, learning methods, and outcomes that help students develop a knowledge base about the environment, the economy, and society, in addition to helping them learn skills, perspectives, and values that guide and motivate them to seek sustainable livelihoods, participate in a democratic society, and live in a sustainable manner¹.

More specifically, quality education for sustainability is designed so that all students can make sustainable choices in their personal lives and participate in democratic processes leading to what is often called sustainability's triple bottom line of social equity, environmental health, and economic prosperity. Today we understand that these three interconnected elements of sustainability operate on both local and global scales. We must consider how our actions impact both current and future generations in our local and world communities.

¹ McMillan and Higgs, *Implementing Sustainability Education: Lessons from Four Innovative Schools*, University of Michigan, April 2003

EfS teaches systems thinking in all grade levels in developmentally-appropriate ways, so students learn to consider the interrelationships between the three parts of sustainability and can better understand how to diagnose system wide problems and implement appropriate changes. Inquiry-based learning, real world problem-solving, and authentic learning grounded in students' own communities is integral to EfS. Students who are educated for sustainability understand systems thinking and how economy, equity, and environment are intrinsically interconnected. As adults, they are able to use a systems approach to interpret their experience and help solve societal problems.

Precedents

Some state and local curriculum standards and frameworks already include learning goals related to creating healthier environments, communities, and economies. Washington, Vermont, and Maryland are examples of states that have created sustainability standards. Many schools are already investigating ways to make their operations more sustainable, for example, by reducing energy consumption and recycling materials. EfS brings the operational and curricular components together so that students experience the integration of learning and action. In many districts, the school building itself has become a part of the curriculum. Students are contributing to the three components of sustainability as they solve real problems related to food, water, health, energy, and technology while also learning what is required in state standards. When developmentally appropriate, students are then moving beyond their schools to consider and help solve problems in the larger community and eventually in the nation and the world. Knowledge and skills gained through these experiences empower these students to make informed choices and act for positive change in their communities as adults.

Many schools and districts have established their own Sustainability Taskforce to create an action plan and implement sustainability in an integrated way into planning, facilities, after school activities, food services, purchasing and curricula. This can be an effective way to coordinate energy and effort throughout curricular and institutional practices.

At the national level, a variety of K-12 and teacher education associations are including sustainability in their operations, professional development, publications, and conference themes. Over two dozen academic disciplinary associations are working together on sustainability curricula (www.aashe.org/dans.) Higher education is even farther, with sixteen higher education associations forming the Higher Education Associations Sustainability Consortium (www.aashe.org/heasc) "with a commitment to advancing sustainability within their constituencies and within the system of higher education itself."²

Resources

Many of us working in education today were not educated for sustainability. We have not experienced EfS ourselves as learners or teachers, so professional development is important to making EfS a reality in our schools. Workshops, webinars, and master's degree programs are currently offered to provide educators with EfS training. Curriculum materials are available for all grade levels and all subject areas and are designed to be easily incorporated into existing curricula and to meet existing state standards. A set of standards for EfS has been developed.³ An online discussion community is available for interested K-12 teachers and staff.⁴ There are several websites with information about EfS and resources for teachers.⁵ We are each in a unique position to help create a sustainable future.

² <http://www2.aashe.org/heasc/index.php>

³ http://www.uspartnership.org/resources/0000/0062/USPEfSStandards_V2.09.08.pdf

⁴ http://www.uspartnership.org/main/view_archive/1

⁵ http://www.uspartnership.org/main/show_passage/48