SCHOOLS FOR EARTH

LEADING SUSTAINABILITY

Future-Oriented School Development with the Whole School Approach

A Toolkit for School Management Teams

Leading Sustainability

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In September 2015, all 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals as part of the 2030 Agenda, committing to develop and implement solutions to global challenges. In this context, education is a key focus, especially education for sustainable development, as it equips learners with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for shaping their own lives, their communities, and society in ways that are ecologically, politically, socially, and economically sustainable.

The 17 Goals

End poverty in all its forms everywhere

End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all

Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation

Reduce inequality within and among countries

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development

Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems; sustainably manage forests; combat desertification; and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels

Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Toolkit Focus

Goal 4 Education for sustainable development is most effective when it is embedded across the entire school. This toolkit gives you practical guidance for integrating sustainability into school culture, development processes, and everyday classroom practice.

Goal 13 Schools for Earth enables schools to make a real contribution to climate action. This toolkit guides you, as a school leader or teacher, in taking practical steps to address climate change and foster environmental awareness at your school, while inspiring the entire school community to take action and build a sustainable and resilient future.

FOREWORDS

Dear School Leaders,

With the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the international community has agreed on a common framework for the future. Education plays a key role in this: it is a decisive lever for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners of all ages to make informed decisions, assume responsibility, and actively participate in shaping just, peaceful, and sustainable societies. In 2023, all UNESCO member states unanimously agreed on a shared goal-setting vision for education that reaffirms that education should be transformative, based on the universal values of sustainability, and cultivate an ethic of care among learners.

What does this mean for schools? This is further concretised in the UNESCO programme "ESD for 2030", which focuses on the transformation of education systems. The goal is to design action- and future-oriented and inclusive learning settings—empowers people to understand, reflect critically on and contribute to possible solutions to the complex challenges of our time, for example the, climate crisis, biodiversity loss, social inequalities, digital transformation, and global conflicts.

School leaders have a special responsibility in this transformation process. They are central drivers of school development and crucially set the course for how sustainability is anchored in the daily life of schools. This is an important task, as sustainable school development does not mean to add single projects to "the running system", but it requires systemic change: Sustainability concerns teaching and curricula as well as school organisation, buildings, school grounds, partnerships, and the lived school culture. For implementing a Whole School Approach, a priority action area of the "ESD for 2030" framework, the entire school community needs to get involved—learners, teachers, leadership, administration, and non-school partners.

When schools implement sustainability holistically, learning becomes meaningful and effective. Students experience self-efficacy by working on real-world issues, participate in democratic processes, and create ideas for more sustainable futures. Research and practice show that precisely these experiences foster motivation and enable deep, sustainable learning. At the same time, schools make an important contribution to educational equity, social cohesion, and a culture of peace.

This toolkit is aligned with UNESCO's efforts to support Member States and schools in implementing ESD for 2030. It directly connects to the goals and action areas of **ESD for 2030**. It has been written for school leaders and school leadership teams who want to lead their school on the path to greater sustainability. The toolkit offers practical step-by-step guidance , and inspiring examples of how the Whole School Approach can be successfully implemented—adapted to different contexts and starting points.

I wish you courage, perseverance, and joy in this important task. Schools can become places where sustainable development is learned and lived—places where young people develop the competencies, values, and attitudes they need to help shape safe and just futures. In this sense, I thank you for your commitment and leadership in transforming education in line with UNESCO's vision for ESD.

Julia Heiss

Julia Heiss
Chief of Section, Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO

Dear School Leaders and Education Stakeholders,

Many of us now acknowledge that transformation in how most humans live in society and interact with our ecosystems is a must! Education is central as we learn how to embed the necessary changes and formal education systems and institutions must transform to enable high-quality, localised, relevant learning for all. The ultimate aspiration is ecological integrity for local communities, connecting across the world.

Schools have a unique and powerful role to play in framing how local communities might engage in the important actions needed while also learning new strategies to be sustainable and regenerative. The Whole School Approach (WSA) presented in this toolkit offers a framework to enable leadership teams to engage communities in the important work of learning how to take action and develop agency intergenerationally (across generations). When schools intentionally nurture agency, they equip students (and the community) not just with knowledge, but with confidence, responsibility, and hope to act together for the wellbeing of their communities and the world.

"Agency in the Anthropocene" was part of the PISA Science Framework for 2025, where the focus was on what 15-year-olds can do, understand, and appreciate about their roles and responsibilities in their ecological systems. The Whole School Approach (WSA) guidebook introduces and operationalises, with concrete tools, a highly relevant and effective framework to empower learners to collaborate across generations within their community to enact ecological integrity.

The systemic changes that this handbook promotes are directly linked to the advancement of Climate Literacy. The OECD plans to develop Climate Literacy as a standalone assessment in the PISA 2029 to measure how effectively education systems are preparing students for the climate challenges. See the PISA 2029 Climate Literacy framework here: www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/PISA-2029-Climate-Literacy.html.

Climate Literacy encompasses the ability to comprehend complex interconnections, identify mis-information, and make informed, effective decisions that contribute to a just and climate-resilient future. Successful Climate Literacy programmes require sustainability and regenerative practices to be embedded across the entire school culture and community. This is the aim of the Whole School Approach: when students experience their school saving energy, reducing food waste, or utilising democratic processes to design the school facilities, they experience sustainability as a lived reality. This fosters their self-efficacy and strengthens the competencies measured with the PISA 2025 Science Framework and to be measured in 2029 with the Climate Literacy assessment.

This handbook offers you the practical tools to transform your school by fostering Climate Literacy holistically. It supports you in translating theoretical frameworks (UNESCO, OECD) into concrete action, optimally preparing your students and your school community for sustainable futures. Thank you for your commitment to leveraging the transformative potential of education and for enabling your school communities to become beacons for sustainable and regenerative education.

Peta White

Associate Professor, Deakin University, Lead of the OECD PISA 2025 Science Framework Environmental Science contribution "Agency in the Anthropocene"

SCHOOLS FOR EARTH

Dear School Leaders,
Dear School Management Teams,

This toolkit, **Leading Sustainability: Future-Oriented School Development with the Whole School Approach**, is designed to support you and your team in guiding your school toward greater sustainability.

In today's increasingly complex world, it is more important than ever for schools to be places where young people not only acquire knowledge but also develop the skills and attitudes needed to actively and responsibly participate in shaping a sustainable society.

This is most effective when sustainability becomes a core part of the school's development and when the entire school community is involved in shaping key areas—not only in the classroom but also across the school campus, in collaboration with partners, through democratic decision-making, and as part of the school culture itself. The Whole School Approach (WSA) presented in this toolkit offers a comprehensive, practice-oriented framework to support this work.

As school leaders[1] and school management teams, your role is crucial. You set the course for school development and create opportunities for engagement, within your team, among students, and across the entire school community. The information and tools provided here are intended to support you on this path in a practical and accessible way.

How to navigate this toolkit

Part 1—Introduction to the concept of the WSA

School development with sustainability as a guiding principle

Why is the WSA relevant for your school?

What does the WSA involve?

Part 2—Recommendations for implementation

Case examples and practical resources

How can you initiate the WSA at your school?

Appendix—Tools and resources

Templates

References and recommended reading to support your efforts

1 In this toolkit, the terms *school leaders* and *school management teams* refer to individuals who hold leadership responsibility within an individual school. Typical titles or job designations include "principal," "headmaster," or "director;" however, leadership responsibility may also be exercised through shared leadership by teams. The key point is that the person or group concerned is responsible for the strategic direction and everyday management of the school.

The **first part** of this toolkit provides a basic introduction to the WSA. It explains what distinguishes this approach and how it aligns the different areas of your school, from teaching and school operations to overall school culture. This section also highlights how the WSA contributes to **quality, future-oriented school education** while strengthening **civic education** as an overarching priority in light of growing polarization and the rise of anti-democratic movements in many countries all over the world. Scientific research shows that sustainability in schools is not only widely supported by many stakeholders but also enables students to actively contribute to solving today's social challenges.

The **second part** focuses entirely on implementation. **Three schools are presented as case study examples**, providing **hands-on inspiration** for putting the WSA into practice. Each case highlights specific tasks, challenges, and solutions for implementing the different phases of the WSA, with particular attention to the roles you, as school leaders and school management teams, can play.

In the **Appendix**, you will find **templates for practical use** at your school, available as **editable PDF forms** for download, including the self-check. This tool helps you assess your school's current status with regard to the WSA. Based on that, you can begin developing initial ideas for possible starting points and take the first steps toward implementing the WSA. You will also find **many suggestions** for further reading and materials to support implementation.

Set your school on its path to change today!

Whatever the current situation at your school, there is no single "right" path or starting point. The WSA offers **many different entry points and development pathways**. Encourage your team to start where it makes the most sense for your school—by building on what is already in place, or by addressing a challenge you have been wanting to tackle. We hope this toolkit provides you with valuable ideas and practical resources to actively and successfully move your school toward a sustainable future.

We would like to thank the authors Ann-Kathrin Schlieszus, Jorrit Holst, Claire Grauer, and Daniel Fischer. Above all, we thank you for your dedication to climate action and sustainability.

We hope you enjoy exploring this toolkit and that it inspires you to try out and adapt these ideas in ways that work for your school.

Your Greenpeace Education Team
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1.

Sustainable School Development Through the Whole School Approach: Concept and Effectiveness

1.1 Creating a Future-Proof School: The Whole School Approach as a Vehicle for School Development

→ This chapter provides an overview of why it is worthwhile to embed sustainability in your school through the Whole School Approach (WSA). It focuses on student learning, the role of school leaders in fostering a learning school, and the shared goal of students, teachers, and administrators to make the entire school future-ready.

How can schools be designed to meet the challenges of our time and prepare young people **for the future in the best possible way**? How can schools become spaces where visions of the future take shape and real challenges faced by young people are solved together? How can schools give students space to engage with socially relevant issues? There are rarely simple answers to the big questions of our time, whether it is ensuring peace, fighting climate change, or strengthening democracy and social justice. Instead, the goal is to **explore and learn together**. Schools, where people with diverse backgrounds live, learn, and work together, can play a vital role in this process.

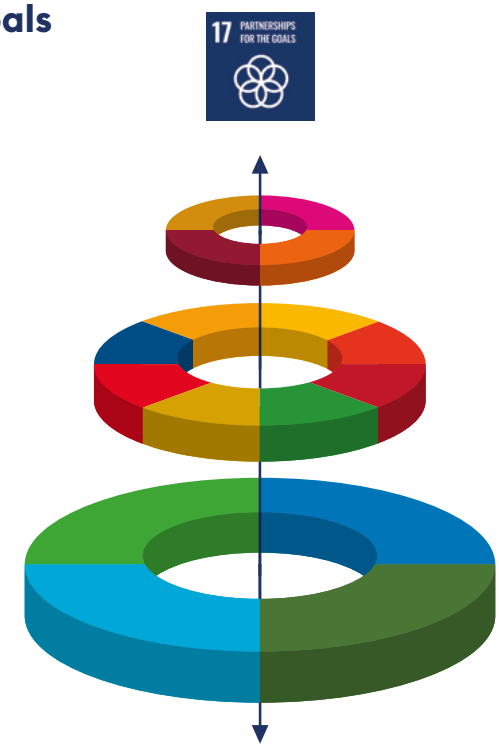
As school leaders, you play a **central role in preparing your school for the future**. You are not only role models for your school community and representatives to the outside world, but also drivers of key development processes. You create the conditions and opportunities that enable engagement, establish routines and norms, motivate commitment, and support your school in moving forward. Your management team has the potential to mentor staff and create spaces where innovative approaches to school education can be tested and normalized.

Education for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, as defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, is "**a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs**" (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Sustainability, therefore, means creating a socially just and economically viable way of life for all within Earth's ecological limits. Students can be empowered to help shape a sustainable future through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD "empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity," as defined in the Education 2030 Framework for Action.[2] ESD equips them to critically examine sustainability challenges and make meaningful contributions to embedding sustainability as a norm in their communities and society at large. ESD is also reflected in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by all countries in 2015, with the aim of achieving them by 2030. The illustration shows that economic activity is not an isolated process but carries a responsibility to contribute to social justice, and that society itself must operate within the ecological limits of our planet. In this toolkit, economic, social, and environmental sustainability are understood as integrated and interdependent.

Click here for a short video on the Sustainable Developement Goals: "We the people"

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals



2 UNESCO (2023). *The recommendation on education for peace and human rights, international understanding, cooperation, fundamental freedoms, global citizenship and sustainable development.*

Future-oriented school education acknowledges the importance of the major challenges of our time and **prioritizes** them. These challenges include the climate crisis, threats to democracy, social inequalities, and the downsides of increasing digitalization. It also creates space to address uncertainty, complexity, and ambivalence, for example, when weighing the pros and cons of different courses of action or managing conflicting sustainability goals. ESD means to engage with the lives of young people, providing not only learning content relevant to everyday life but also opportunities to develop the school itself. **By focusing on key 21st-century competencies and aligning school development accordingly, the overall quality of schools improves.** Schools then become more than places where students learn about sustainability; they become learning organizations capable of adapting to a changing world.

A central approach to transforming the entire school into a learning space for shaping the future is the **Whole School Approach (WSA)**. In this approach, ESD is understood as a collaborative task involving the entire school community. Schools become democratic spaces where sustainable development is envisioned and shaped, helping students strengthen their core skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, and taking action.

Roadmap ESD for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020)

International Recommendations for Whole School Sustainability

The Whole School Approach (or, when addressing all kinds of educational institutions, the Whole Institution Approach) is highly recommended at different political levels for implementing sustainable education holistically. On a global level, the United Nations' *Roadmap ESD for 2030* (UNESCO, 2020) lists whole institution approaches as one of five priority action areas for implementing ESD worldwide. Similarly, the UNECE has repeatedly emphasized the importance of whole school approaches in sustainable school transitions (see UNECE, 2022).

Moreover, the importance of a Whole Institution Approach is highlighted, for instance, in the Regional Strategic Framework of the Southern African Development Community (SADC): "Strengthening action-oriented ESD, where practice in relation to theory enhances the results of ESD, and whole institutional approaches are needed from policy to practice" (SADC, 2022, p. 9). And the Council of the European Union stresses: "Whole-institution approaches to sustainability incorporating all areas of activity are not always sufficiently present. Such approaches can include teaching and learning; governance; research and innovation; and infrastructure, facilities and operations, and should engage students, staff, parents, and local and wider communities" (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 3).

Sustainability in schools: Tailwind from students, teachers, and school administrators

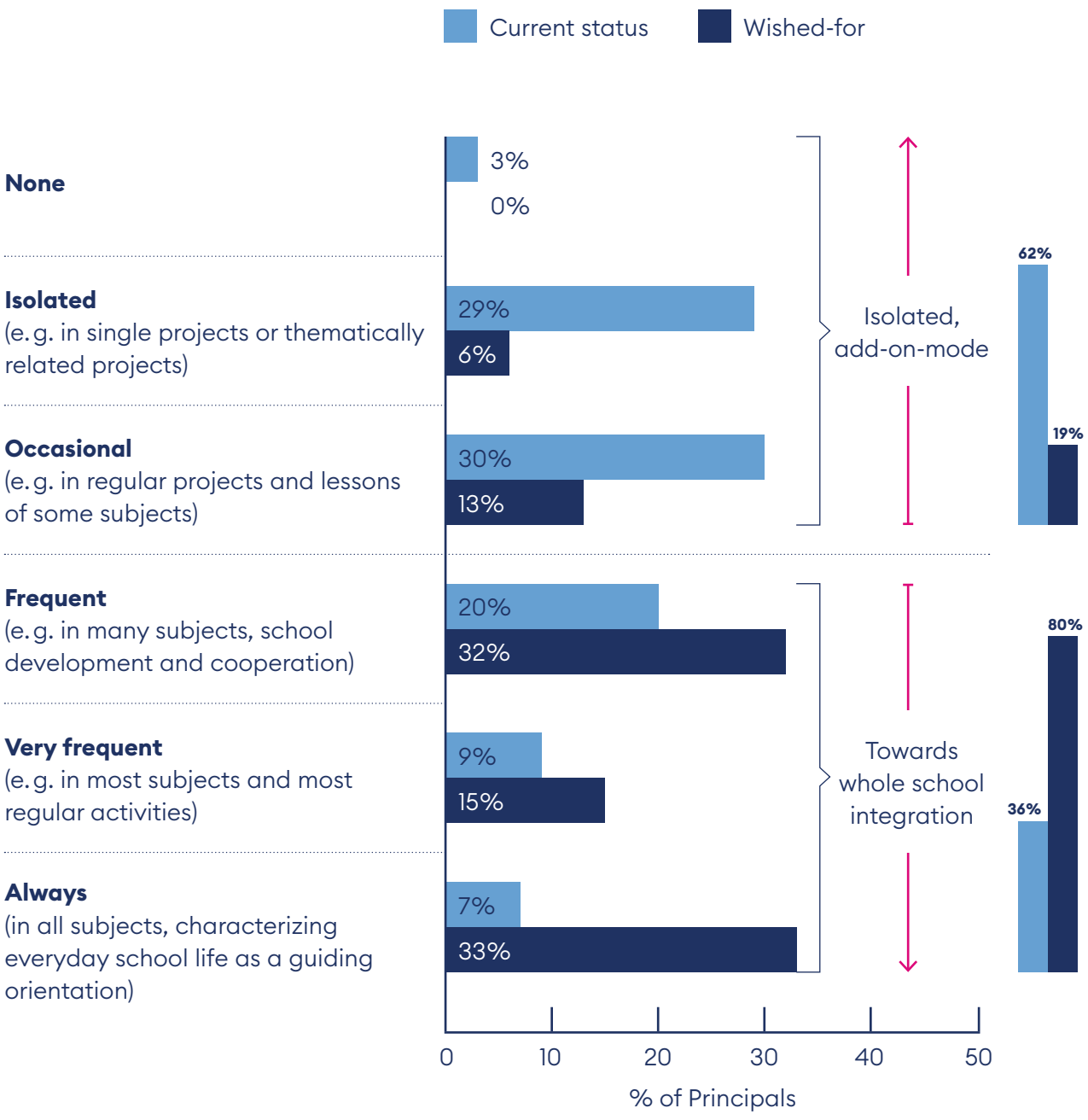
Future-oriented education is not only politically desired; it is also strongly supported by students, teachers, and school administrators. To illustrate this with a concrete example, a large-scale survey of teachers and learners in Germany shows that both groups wish for considerably more time for ESD in their daily school life.[3] Also, a nationwide representative survey showed that 80% of German school leaders stated that, in an ideal school, sustainability should be integrated across most or all subjects and throughout the school's overall development.[4] While sustainability and ESD are often regarded as "add-ons," meaning extra tasks, the WSA provides a framework to integrate **sustainability, modern learning culture, and school quality in a coherent way**. By adopting the WSA, schools are not only preparing for the future—they are also responding to the priorities of administrators, teachers, and students alike.

→ On the following pages, this toolkit provides background information and practical tools to help you implement a future-oriented, innovative school education in line with the WSA.

3 See Grund & Brock (2022); for students on a global scale, see UNESCO (2022); and for university students in the United Kingdom: Students Organising for Sustainability United Kingdom (2025).

4 See Holst et al. (2025).

The degree of sustainability integration in schools from the perspective of school leaders in the exemplary context of Germany



Source: Holst et al. 2025, p. 4

1.2 How Can Schools Enable Young People to Help Shape a More Sustainable Society?

→ This chapter presents the core principles of a WSA, showing how school communities can experience and shape sustainability in everyday school life. It highlights how schools can empower young people to contribute to a more sustainable world and how a WSA can enhance overall school quality.

The aim of the WSA is not only to enable students to **experience sustainability** and democracy in everyday school life—whether on the school grounds, in canteens, in classrooms, or in classroom discussions.[5] The goal is also to empower them **to actively contribute to a sustainable world**.[6] The key concept here is **self-efficacy**: Students reflect on their own behavior ("How can we reduce our ecological and social footprint?") as well as on structural and systemic questions ("How can we increase our positive handprint in society?"). This approach helps students develop essential **skills for societal participation**, including negotiating within the school community, finding compromises, exploring sustainability across subjects, and engaging in collaborative decision-making.

More information on the ecological handprint

Just as social challenges are constantly evolving, the WSA is not a development goal that schools can achieve and then be done with. Instead, it represents an ongoing, collaborative process. New topics and questions continually arise, and the steady turnover of people within the school community means that negotiation processes are constantly being renewed. Visions and priorities are jointly redefined, and new pathways are collectively chartered. The WSA views this constant **change as an opportunity** to introduce fresh questions, ideas, and perspectives that enrich the shared vision of a sustainable school.

5 For the importance of informal learning for sustainability in schools, see Barth, Fischer et al. (2012).

6 On the effectiveness of the WSA, see Holst, Grund & Brock (2024).

Sustainability is at the core of quality school education

Education for Sustainable Development is an important contribution to quality education. This is reflected in the SDGs, where ESD is an integral part of SDG 4 "Quality education". Various studies from different countries show that ESD contributes to quality education in multiple ways.[7] **Good education addresses key social issues that matter to students in their everyday lives**.[8] When schools address the major challenges of our time and connect with students' visions of the future, as well as their worries and fears, learning becomes more meaningful and personally relevant, fostering intrinsic motivation. Sustainability, as one of today's central societal challenges, offers **promising opportunities** to address complex, real-world issues, negotiate conflicting goals, and experience self-efficacy through collaborative action. In this way, students can develop "**action competence in the Anthropocene**." This dimension will also be assessed in the PISA study as of 2025 (White et al., 2024), highlighting that an ESD learning culture and quality school education are closely intertwined. The WSA thus has **considerable potential to enhance overall school quality**.

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7 For an overview, see Laurie et al. (2016).

8 For more explanations regarding Klafkis conception of education which adresses key social issues and how it matches with ESD, see Kvamme (2021).

Whole School Approach

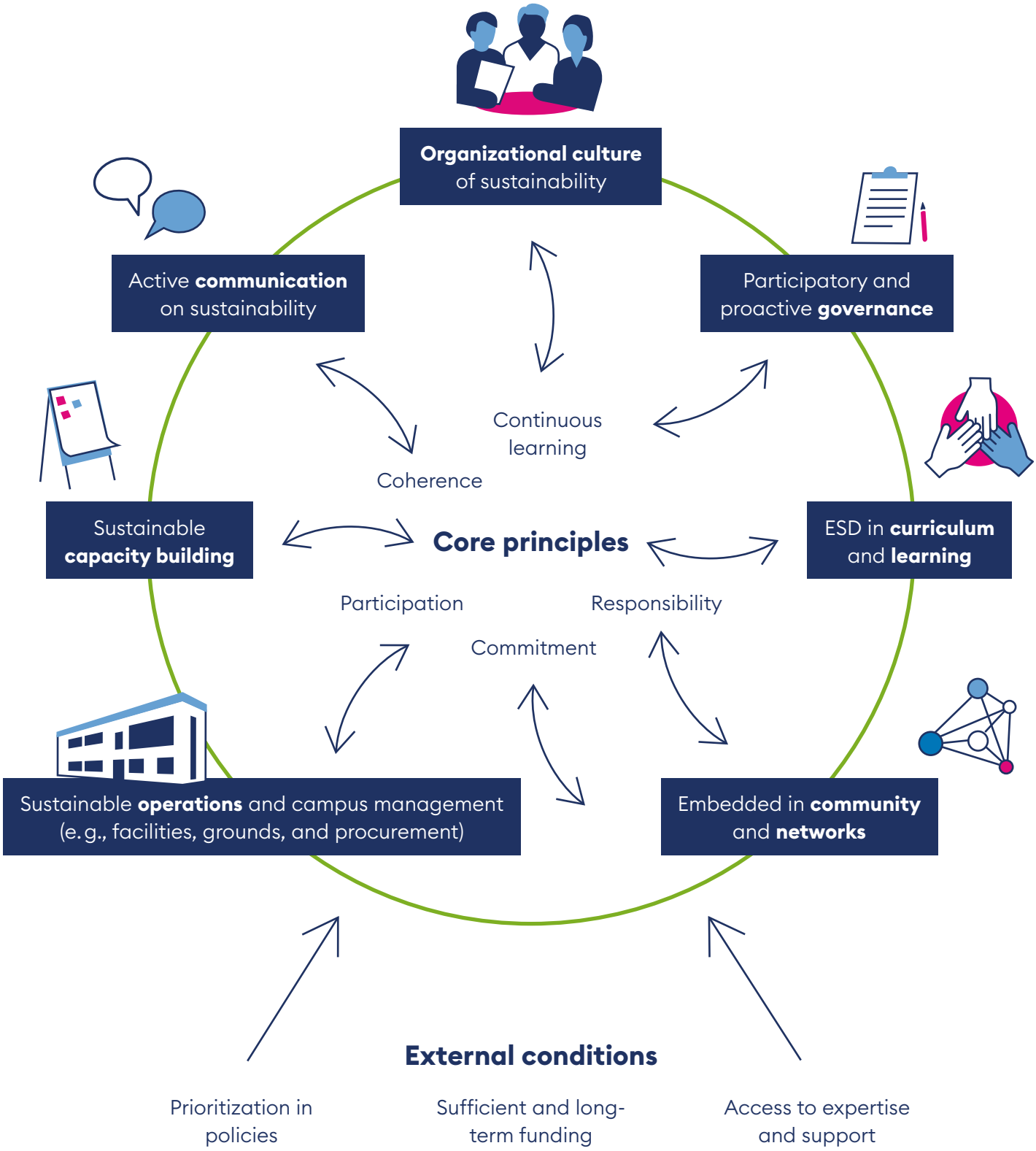


Figure based on: Holst, 2023

Sustainability in the WSA *permeates all areas of thinking and action, as well as processes and school routines—both in school development and in classroom practice. Sustainability, in the sense of a WSA, is closely linked to school culture: To what extent do schools engage with pathways toward a socially just and ecologically sustainable world as an integral part of school life? How can they create lasting spaces for participation and democratic learning? The WSA introduced on the following pages provides constructive answers to these and similar questions.*

1.3 What Makes a School Sustainable? Core Principles of a Whole School Approach

→ This chapter highlights the core principles of the WSA, that is, key ideas that underpin sustainable school development across all areas of activity. They serve as a kind of overarching compass for sustainability-related school development processes.

Research on sustainability in schools highlights the core principles of the WSA. These principles permeate and connect all areas of action of sustainability-oriented school development.[9] They provide a guiding framework while also encouraging reflection and discussion:

Coherence

In the WSA, experiencing and learning about sustainability extends far beyond the classroom, permeating the entire school community. Coherence as a core principle means not only teaching sustainability but also living it in everyday life, in other words, walking the talk.

How can sustainability become a regular part of school life, rather than just a topic for project days, short-term projects or extracurricular special interest activities? How can it be integrated into food services, procurement, and decision-making processes, as well as into other aspects of school life? The self-check tools provided in the Appendix can help you explore these questions ↘ p. 52.

Participation

Creating spaces for participation and civic education is a central element of sustainability-oriented school development. Participation strengthens the agency of all members of the school community. In the classroom, it is also a defining feature of ESD, empowering students to help shape both their own and societal future.

What opportunities do students, parents, and non-teaching staff currently have to help shape school life? Are they represented in key committees or steering groups ↘ p. 46 ff. or other school bodies? How can teachers be supported in creating a participatory ESD learning culture in the classroom?

9 This introduction to the WSA is based on Holst's (2023) systematic review.

Continuous learning

A sustainable school is never “finished”; it is an ongoing journey in which all members of the school community learn with and from each other. In this way, schools become learning organizations and living systems, capable of adapting to current events and new challenges.

Which formats could make joint learning a regular part of your school’s routines in the long term? Could regular school development days, town hall meetings, or backcasting sessions ↘ p. 62 provide opportunities to review sustainability goals and track progress?

Responsibility

When implementing a WSA, responsibility for sustainability is not left to a few individuals; it is shared with as many members of the school community as possible, including school leadership, school authorities, department and subject coordinators, teachers, administrative staff, maintenance staff, students, parents, and regional partners.

Who is already taking responsibility for sustainability at your school, and how could this circle be expanded ↘ p. 46 ff? How can the groups and individuals involved assume specific tasks and responsibilities to advance sustainability at your school?

Commitment

Establishing sustainability as a core standard in schools is an ongoing process that requires a sustained commitment from the entire school community.

How could sustainability be formally embedded at your school, for example, in its mission statement, school profile, internal curricula (see Rotstadt Gymnasium ↘ p. 69), or the school development plan? Could your school pursue a long-term sustainability certification to strengthen and showcase its commitment?

Participation and democratic engagement in schools: A central task of socially relevant education

In times of social polarization, civic education is a crucial task for schools, and the WSA can play an important role in supporting it. Within an ESD learning culture, participatory methods can facilitate the **democratic co-creation of learning processes**. At the same time, students can experience genuine **participation by actively engaging** in decision-making, implementing, and evaluating school processes. This allows them to experience firsthand, in a safe environment, what it means to express their views on societal issues and contribute as active members of society. It is essential, however, that student participation is not limited to isolated occasions but becomes **an integral part of school structures**, for example, through permanent seats in key decision-making bodies of the school community. Moreover, democratic participation should not only concern specific decisions (e.g., whether to install a unisex school toilet) but also include broader strategic directions and the school's quality development processes.[10]

10 See Schnack (2008).

1.4 Sustainability in Action: Key Areas of the Whole School Approach

→ This chapter provides an overview of the six key areas of action of the Whole School Approach, highlighting how sustainability can be experienced in schools.

Sustainability can be made tangible in schools through a range of closely interconnected areas of everyday practice ↘ p. 20.[11] These areas are rooted in the school's culture, that is, **in the values and assumptions that are lived as normal and self-evident**, which are expressed in both thinking and action. By embedding sustainability in daily life, schools not only teach concepts but also model sustainable behaviors, making them a natural part of the school's identity. The following sections provide an overview of how sustainability is embedded in the different aspects of school life and school development:

→ **Reflexive questions** for all fields of action are provided in the reflection tool for school management teams (see Appendix ↘ p. 87 ff).

→ Members of school management teams take on different roles in everyday school life. An overview of these roles and their implications for the fields of action is provided in Chapter 2.1 ↘ p. 36 ff.

Participatory and proactive governance:

Implementing a WSA means **making sustainability a priority and a guiding principle of school development**. This involves establishing structures that make sustainability a standard part of decision-making processes, for example, through steering committees, action plans, agreements with the school authority, or self-evaluation. As democratic engagement and collaborative work in shaping school life are core principles, a WSA depends on the **broad and active involvement** of all groups within the school community.

ESD in curriculum and learning:

Consistently living a future-oriented approach within schools also means providing space for sustainability learning, both **within individual subjects and across disciplines**, while firmly embedding ESD

11 The following description is based on the above-mentioned review of the WSA (Holst, 2023).

in internal school curricula. **Practical learning** is enhanced by linking sustainability topics with the physical and social environment, for example, the school building and site management, regional energy supply and mobility, or regional and national policy.

Embedded in community and networks:

By cooperating with local businesses, non-formal educational institutions, NGOs, and other schools, **learning becomes rooted in relevant community contexts**. This enables students to engage with real-world challenges while also allowing schools to contribute to local society and increase their visibility in the broader community. Drawing on partners' **knowledge, skills, and resources** can further enrich the school's work and help reduce teacher workloads.

Sustainable capacity building:

Building capacity for sustainability in schools requires not only **professional development and training** but also **dedicated time** for teachers to work together to implement an ESD learning culture within subjects and across interdisciplinary formats. Creating such space in everyday school life can be challenging. However, it is highly rewarding—close staff cooperation can boost motivation, especially for teachers with high workloads. Sustainability in schools also means **considering this goal when hiring staff and filling functional positions**, and, where possible, supporting teachers involved in steering groups by reducing teaching loads and clarifying communication priorities.

Active communication on sustainability:

Solar panels on the school roof **contribute** to sustainability learning **only if their purpose is visible and understood**. Communicating what they are for and why they are there is essential. Effective communication within the school, such as via information events, newsletters, or the school newspaper, and externally, for example, through the website, local newspaper articles, open house days, or the advisory board of educational partners, helps make existing initiatives visible. At the same time, **a clear information base** enables school members to participate in key sustainability-related decisions in everyday school life and to represent these decisions internally and externally.

Sustainable operations and campus management:

Sustainable design of school facilities can take many forms, including unsealing and greening schoolyards, ensuring barrier-free access to buildings, providing adequate covered bicycle parking, offering organic and regional products in school canteens, and adopting sustainable procurement practices for furniture, supplies, and equipment. While such measures may require **short-term investment**, they **are often offset by long-term savings**; directly, for example, through reduced electricity costs, and

indirectly when students are involved in redesign projects and, as a result, assume greater responsibility for caring for school buildings and grounds.

Sustainable school culture:

School culture refers to the self-evident, often unquestioned norms that shape everyday school life. **Making sustainability a natural part of school life** connects all the areas of action described above. The school's culture, or "ethos," is visible in tangible aspects, such as buildings, grounds, symbols, and everyday practices, but is also deeply rooted in the less visible values, norms, and assumptions within the school.[12] To support reflection, it may be helpful to consider the place of values such as justice, community, equality, benevolence, respect, and a sense of connection with nature in everyday school life, and how these values are lived within the school community through relational learning processes, communication, conflict resolution, and participation. As the school management team, you have a central role in establishing and communicating the school's rituals, values, and narratives.

12 See Fischer (2011).

How to get your school authority on board

Governance structures in schools can vary widely across countries. However, effective collaboration between schools and higher authorities often plays a crucial role in WSA implementation. As a school management team, you often rely on the school authority for decisions related to building and site management. This raises the question of how the authority can actively support the creation of a sustainable, future-oriented school.[13] Limited municipal resources or initially low interest in sustainable procurement may slow the process, but don't be discouraged. **Every step counts and can pave the way for greater change.** It is therefore essential to involve the school authority early in the ESD school development process. If your school is planning a sustainability-focused day, invite the school authority to help shape the event, and include one of their representatives in your steering group. If your municipality has a sustainability manager, consider contacting them and involving them in the communication between the school and the authority.

13 The central importance of school authorities for sustainability in schools was also pointed out by many school leaders in the aforementioned national school management study (Holst et al., 2025).

Schools as reflexive microcosms[14]

On a small scale, schools can be understood as **reflections of a complex society**. When a Whole School Approach is put into practice, students encounter the diverse challenges and conflicts of interest associated with sustainability issues. As in society at large, different values and objectives may conflict. The "reflexive" character of this microcosm lies in the **school's ability to provide a structured space** in which these conflicts can be made visible, analyzed, and negotiated on a factual and constructive level. This is a key learning potential of a WSA. In addition, the solutions and skills developed and tested within the school microcosm can also be transferred by students and staff members into other social contexts, **making schools crystallization spaces for a more sustainable development of society as a whole**.

14 See Sterling (2003).

1.5 Whole School Approach: Sustainability in Everyday School Life Is Effective and Measurable

→ This chapter shows that sustainability in everyday school life can effectively support sustainability-related learning and demonstrates that progress in implementing the WSA can be measured. It presents findings from a nationwide scientific study in Germany that examined these issues.

A nationwide study conducted in Germany by Freie Universität Berlin shows that sustainability experienced in everyday school life, in line with the WSA, is both measurable and impactful on students and teachers alike.

The WSA scale: Measuring sustainability experienced in everyday school life

To measure the WSA through surveys, a questionnaire was developed and extensively validated over several years as part of the German National ESD Monitoring. The WSA scale captures what students and teachers experience in their everyday school environment.[15] It covers various areas of sustainable school development and practice ↘ p. 31, including teaching, buildings and grounds, governance, communication, school culture, and connections to the broader educational landscape.

The original study for in-depth information

15 A version of the questionnaire prepared for use is available and included in the original study by Holst, Grund, & Brock (2024).

Free-to-use questionnaire on sustainability in everyday school life

The original WSA scale consists of 13 questions for students and 15 questions for teachers. It can be adapted in length and is freely available. In a national study of approximately 3,000 students and teachers from various educational settings, the scale was applied nationwide in Germany for the first time. There are substantial connections between an experienced WSA and central target dimensions of high-quality ESD ↘ p. 31.

→ The questionnaire is suitable for large-scale studies. However, it can also be used **as an evaluation and reflection tool within the context of school organizational development**. An extended self-check tool that can be reproduced is included in the Appendix ↘ p. 87 ff.

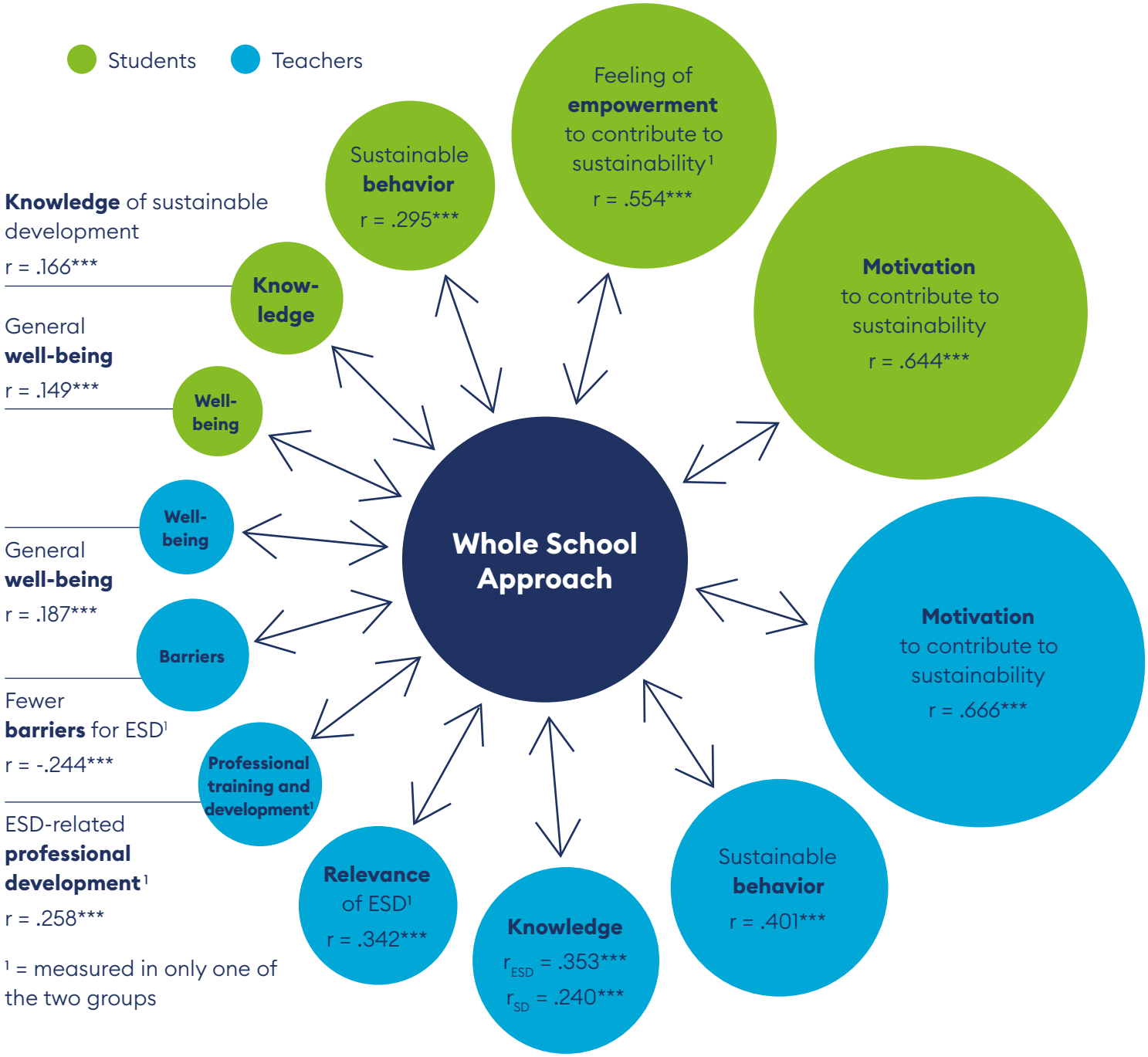
The questionnaire on sustainability in everyday school life

Effective sustainability learning with the Whole School Approach

Data from the German National ESD Monitoring clearly indicates that **students' everyday experience of sustainability as a WSA is strongly associated with how motivated and empowered they feel by their schools to contribute to sustainability themselves**. Students who experienced more sustainability in line with a WSA reported more sustainable behaviors, higher self-assessed knowledge of sustainable development, and greater overall sense of well-being.

The diagram below illustrates the statistical correlations between sustainability experienced as a WSA at educational institutions and key dimensions of effective sustainability education. Circle size reflects correlation strength; effect sizes (r) are reported, and all correlations are **highly significant** (***).

Effective sustainability learning with the Whole School Approach



Adapted from Holst, Grund & Brock (2024); n ≈ 3,000 students and teachers.

2.

How Can You Implement the Whole School Approach?

→ The second part of this toolkit provides concrete, case-study examples and practical tools to guide you through each step of implementing the WSA.

Exemplary WSA practices from around the world[16]

To be ready for the future, societies must find ways out of the unsustainable present, both at the broader societal level and within the smaller scale of school communities. The WSA supports this by promoting a **collective, continuous, and systematic learning process** aimed at making schools increasingly sustainable and enabling students to take an active role beyond the school itself.

Holistic, ESD-oriented school development as a learning process

This learning process does not follow a linear path from start to finish; instead, it is cyclical, encompassing multiple steps and **continuous development** ↘ p. 34. The WSA does not have to be a completely new process; much of it can be integrated into existing structures and efforts, easing the workload for you and others involved.

As a school management team, you play **a central role** at each stage: establishing structures and forming teams; assessing the current situation through a self-check; planning, implementing, and evaluating measures for change; celebrating successes; and motivating and enabling the school community to continue building on what has already been achieved. The successful implementation of the WSA is a shared responsibility, and much depends on how you understand and carry out your role as the school management team.

16 See Mathie and Wals (2022).

Communication as a key element of the WSA development process

Effective communication supports every phase of the WSA development process and plays a decisive role in its success.

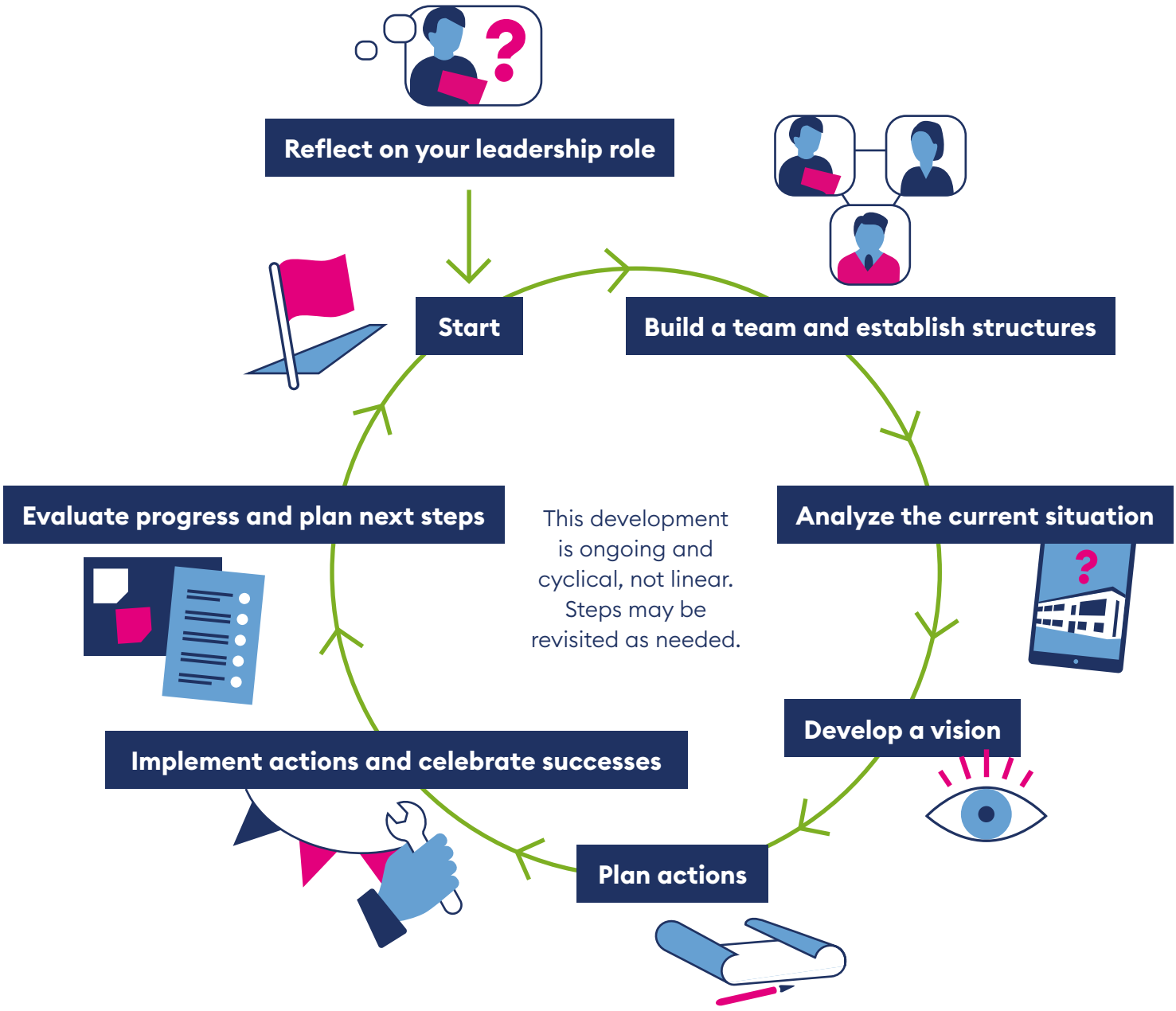


Figure: own illustration

The following three fictional example schools are set within the German school system. They demonstrate concrete, practical applications intended to inspire the implementation of the WSA in other national contexts and school types.

Fictional Case Studies

Case study 1:
Rotstadt Gymnasium[17]
School leader: Ms. Röd

Rotstadt Gymnasium serves an urban, relatively privileged community and is valued for its support services and strong academic outcomes. So far, ESD has been integrated into individual subjects and aligned with the respective subject-specific curricula.

Case study 2:
Blauburg Primary School
School leader: Mr. Azul

Blauburg Primary School is situated in a district locally regarded as a social hotspot. So far, ESD has been seen primarily as a privileged topic at the school, while other issues considered more urgent have received far greater attention in everyday school life.

Case study 3:
Grünheim High School
School leader: Ms. Verda

Grünheim High School is located in a rural, agriculture-focused region. It is valued locally for its strong emphasis on traditional vocational training. A small team of two teachers developed ESD as part of an initial pilot project, for which the school received an award.

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17 In Germany, a Gymnasium is a type of secondary school that prepares students for higher education. Students graduate with the Abitur, which qualifies them for university admission.

2.1 What Role Does the School Leadership Play?

→ This chapter outlines the different leadership roles that school leaders and school management teams may assume when implementing the WSA. It illustrates three typical phases of the process.

School leaders and school management teams will have very different perceptions of what it means to lead a school. Depending on their approach and mindset, a school leader's role in an ESD-oriented school development process will vary. In general, school leaders can support the process in multiple ways and through different roles, as outlined below.

Walk the talk

The core principles of ESD, such as participation, shared responsibility, and long-term thinking, imply that school leaders serve as **role models** through their decisions and actions, without undermining these principles. At the same time, depending on the stage of the development process, strong leadership, clear accountability, and short-term goal orientation can also be valuable.

The following examples illustrate the various roles that you, as a school leader, can take on within your school management team in holistic, ESD-oriented school development processes:

Example situation	Role of the school leader
Is there a **desire or increasing expectation** to engage more deeply with ESD, for example, from students, staff, parents, or state education authorities?	**As initiator:** ▬ Introduces the topic to the school ▬ Guides the process so the school can explore how and to what extent it can address ESD **As manager:** ▬ Assigns responsibilities ▬ Puts ESD on the agenda ▬ Organizes events

Example situation	Role of the school leader
Are there **active groups** working on sustainability at the school? Where do they stand in their work, and what is needed to further strengthen them, involve more participants, or expand their activities to other areas?	**As networker:** ▬ Establishes connections with other groups within the school and clarifies the shared understanding of ESD ▬ Invites new participants to get involved **As source of inspiration:** ▬ Challenges groups to set new priorities and welcomes new members and alliances ▬ Brings fresh content and topics **As enabler:** ▬ Recognizes the groups' work and provides resources ▬ Identifies opportunities to support and enhance their efforts, such as competitions
Is there **resistance and controversy** within the school community regarding whether, or to what extent, the school should engage with ESD?	**As moderator:** ▬ Organizes and facilitates discussions and debates, takes resistance seriously, and ensures that all perspectives are heard **As decision-maker:** ▬ Sets priorities when consensus cannot be reached ▬ Argues with well-founded personal conviction ▬ Stands by decisions made

While roles may vary depending on the situation, school leaders' personal perceptions and inclinations also influence how they approach their role. Being aware of these beliefs and tendencies can be helpful.

Reflecting on your role as a school leader or school manager

Communication plays an important role in implementing a WSA. Depending on their understanding of their role and personality, school leaders approach conflict or criticism in very different ways. **What type are you?** A. Bartz's checklist[18] offers a number of self-assessment reflection questions, for example:

Situation	Role of the school leader
Control	▬ When and how did you last monitor the completion of a task or responsibility? How did you proceed? How did you feel while doing so? How did the people whose work you monitored respond?
Anger	▬ What behavior or whose actions have angered you recently? How did you deal with your anger? How did you communicate your anger to the other person?
Criticism	▬ When and with whom did you most recently have reason to offer criticism? How did you communicate it? → If you had a critical discussion, how did it go? To what extent were you able to clearly convey the facts and your requested changes? How did you ensure that the person concerned followed through on your request and regarded it as binding? → After a critical discussion, how did you behave? Did you avoid the person, or did you seek to engage more with them? → If you avoided contact, what was the reason? And what feelings do you have toward the person you criticized?

To clarify roles, it **is important to understand which stage the school development process is currently in** and what this means for your role. It can be helpful to distinguish **three broad phases**, each of which places different demands on school leaders and school management teams.

18 Bartz (2013).

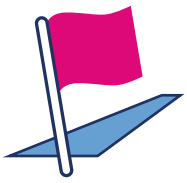
The three phases of WSA implementation and the role of the school leadership[19]

Phase	Role of the school leadership
Vision-building	▬ Sets impulses ▬ Encourages stocktaking ▬ Motivates participatory goal development ▬ Moderates the formation of working groups ▬ Seeks institutional and financial support
Implementation	▬ Drives implementation by motivating and enabling ▬ Increasingly delegates responsibility ▬ Keeps an eye on the achievement of goals ▬ Suggests adjustments to goals or processes as needed ▬ Links school and community actors ▬ Shares successes within the school and with the broader community
Consolidation	▬ Coordinates school development ▬ Verifies the achievement of goals ▬ Adjusts goals and processes as needed ▬ Reviews outcomes and considers a renewed vision → If established structures are stable and work independently at this stage, the school leadership may consider stepping back.

For more information on the three phases, as well as pedagogical ideas, see Chapters 2.5 (vision-building), 2.6 (implementation), and 2.8 (consolidation).

19 See Forsten Seisser et al. (2003); Müller et al. (2020).

2.2 Start Now! But How?



→ This chapter offers suggestions on how to start implementing the WSA at your school in an accessible, low-threshold way.

ESD as an educational concept cannot be reduced to individual issues such as environmental protection or climate change. Instead, it is connected to **a wide range of questions**; for example, what constitutes a good life, **what desirable futures might look like**, and how we can contribute to achieving them today ↘ p. 12 ff.

The reasons and starting points for schools to decide to launch an ESD development process are just as diverse as the questions themselves. Possible starting points include:

- sharpening the pedagogical self-image and educational profile (see Rotstadt Gymnasium)

- making learning opportunities more relevant to students and integrating new resources into the school (see Blauburg Primary School)

- strengthening the future orientation of the school's educational programs and offerings (see Grünheim High School)

Rotstadt Gymnasium

Motivation for implementing the WSA:
Students at Rotstadt Gymnasium have voiced concerns about high academic pressure, which has increasingly affected the school climate. This is evident in growing individualism and declining solidarity, along with lower engagement in everyday school life and diminishing interest in voluntary ESD activities such as the Senegal partnership club.

Goals of the WSA implementation:
The school leader, Ms. Röd, aims to strengthen student participation and cultivate a greater sense of social responsibility through an ESD-oriented school development process. She seeks to moderate the prevailing emphasis on career orientation and to promote more meaningful work and a stronger sense of community among students and teachers. To achieve this, she plans to involve all members of the school community in an ongoing dialogue focused on shared values, pedagogical goals, and the school's educational mission.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Röd acts as moderator and agenda setter. She sees her role in initiating discussions on the school's value orientation among staff and students and guiding collaborative reflection processes.

Blauburg Primary School

Motivation for implementing the WSA:
At Blauburg Primary School, everyday work is often marked by student conflicts and disruptions in classroom settings. Key issues include limited engagement with students' families and the local community, as well as a lack of resources (financial, material, expertise, and time) to provide learning opportunities better tailored to the students' needs.

Goals of the WSA implementation:
A primary goal for the school leader, Mr. Azul, is to spark greater student interest in learning through ESD-related teaching and learning approaches and to develop new programs and secure additional resources for the school. The aim is to create better conditions for up-to-date, meaningful learning.

Role of the school leader:
Mr. Azul sees his role in the learning process mainly as a manager and educational entrepreneur. He conducts needs assessments with staff to identify the school's specific needs and determine which external programs or resources would help attract new partners, implement projects, provide professional development and training for teachers, and improve school facilities.

Grünheim High School

Motivation for implementing the WSA:
Grünheim High School enjoys strong support from the local community, as many residents attended the school themselves and then pursued vocational training. However, student satisfaction has recently declined, as they feel the school's focus on traditional vocational career paths is outdated.

Goals of the WSA implementation:
The school leader, Ms. Verda, hopes that an ESD-oriented school development process will strengthen connections to future-oriented career fields. She also aims to involve students more actively in shaping school development, fostering their interest and motivation in these career pathways. In doing so, Ms. Verda aims for the school to be seen once again by young people as a strong brand and a top choice for innovative, forward-looking career preparation; for example, by emphasizing topics such as resource efficiency and climate protection.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Verda serves primarily as an enabler, motivator, and sponsor in the school development process. She takes students' dissatisfaction with the school's career-oriented programs—seen as too old-fashioned—as a starting point to engage staff in further developing these offerings in collaboration with students, local businesses, and other stakeholders. From Ms. Verda's perspective, ESD is a concept that most of the school community has had little exposure to so far. At the same time, integrating sustainability into the school offers an opportunity to connect learning to future-relevant career pathways.

It has often proven effective to use **existing opportunities as starting points** for ESD-oriented school development. Current activities or approaches within the school can be expanded and further developed. There may also be pressure or unmet needs within the school or the broader community that could be addressed effectively through an ESD-oriented process. The following questions may help identify such starting points:

Starting points (examples)	Responsibility of the school management team
Grassroots initiatives: Who are the active and motivated students, staff, or community groups in the school environment who are already driving ESD-oriented projects?	▬ Continue to support and foster grassroots initiatives.
Incentives: Where are there competitions, funding programs, or new alliances and partnerships that offer the school development opportunities or additional resources?	▬ Engage in strategic networking and resource acquisition.
Current challenges: Which current challenges or problem areas within the school could be effectively addressed through ESD-oriented school development (e.g., professional development for implementing ESD requirements, challenges related to interdisciplinary collaboration, etc.)? For which current challenges or potential conflicts in the school environment could an ESD-oriented development process offer opportunities or possible solutions (e.g., high energy costs, reputational issues, non-compliance with legal requirements)?	▬ Ensure a solution-oriented approach to school development through ESD, creating a shared integrative framework. ▬ Establish mechanisms through ESD school development to respond proactively and constructively to challenges, helping the school move beyond a “defensive” stance.

Starting points for ESD school development

In the United Kingdom, the "doorways approach" has been developed, identifying eight key areas.[20] Each of these "doorways" can serve as a starting point for ESD-oriented school development. Working actively in one area helps gradually build connections to the others. The eight "doorways" are:

- **Food services:** How can school meals be designed to be healthy, local, regional, and ethically sourced?

- **Mobility:** How do students and staff get to school? What options exist, how accessible and feasible are they, and what impacts do they have?

- **Energy and water:** To what extent does the school have sufficient energy and water supplies? How does the school use energy and water? What is the level of consumption, what costs are involved, and what opportunities exist for optimization?

- **Consumption and waste:** What products are sold on the school campus? Where do they come from and how were they produced? Where is circular thinking applied, and what items are simply discarded?

- **Buildings and grounds:** What materials have been used in the school? How does the architecture make sustainable behavior easier or harder?

- **Inclusion and participation:** How can people from diverse backgrounds participate in school life? How are prejudices and biases addressed?

- **Local engagement:** How does the school connect with the community? What opportunities do students have to work on local challenges and improve the quality of life for themselves and others?

- **Global dimension:** How does the school help students see themselves as global citizens and act accordingly?

20 Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) (2008).

How political can and should education be?

The question of how political education can or should be arises repeatedly, both in light of current political developments and in the context of ESD. Critics worry that ESD could lead to indoctrination or manipulation of students and argue that teachers must remain neutral. However, this argument is based on a misunderstanding, as clarified by the Beutelsbach Consensus, a core document for German school education, which defines three guiding principles.

Firstly, avoiding overwhelming students does not require teachers to be neutral. Rather, it means that students should not be presented with fixed opinions in ways that prevent them from forming their own judgements. Secondly, sustainability topics, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, are actively debated within the scientific community, making them particularly well-suited for classroom discussions, in which controversial issues can be addressed as such. Thirdly, research shows that students have a strong interest in sustainability topics; therefore, teaching these subjects does not constitute indoctrination but aligns instruction with student interests. Finally, integrating sustainability issues into teaching is supported by human rights principles. It can even be regarded as a democratic responsibility for teachers.[21]

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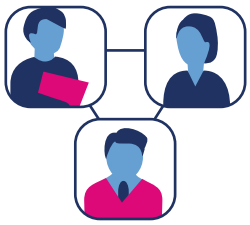
21 For background on the Beutelsbach Consensus, see Christensen & Grammes (2020). For a detailed discussion of the debate in Germany on how political ESD can and should be, see Kenner & Singer-Brodowski (2024).

2.3 Establish a Sustainability Team



→ This chapter presents the sustainability team as a key body in implementing the WSA and outlines the roles it can play.

Changing a school is a process that cannot be initiated or carried out by a single individual. An important first step is therefore to establish a strong team to support the school development process with an ESD focus. This team should meet **several criteria**:

- be of a manageable size (depending on the staff, e.g., 4 to 6 members),
- represent different stakeholder groups within the school
- hold a clear mandate and have access to the necessary resources

It is advisable to establish a central **steering group**, referred to in this toolkit as the **sustainability team**. This team is responsible for overseeing the entire process and coordinating its various work strands. In addition, smaller subgroups can and should be formed to develop and implement specific measures.

As a school leader, you can support the sustainability team in various ways, depending on how you understand your role ↘ p. 36 ff:

- **As an active member of the team:** Your involvement gives the team a strong mandate and helps ensure that its work connects directly with everyday leadership responsibilities. As a school leader, you may choose to chair or lead the group, but you are not required to do so. Your contribution may also be advisory or supportive, and it may shift over time.

- **As a supporter of the team:** You do not need to be directly involved in the team's work. You can also provide external support by allocating time and resources and by giving the team visibility and space in committees and at school events.

For larger schools, the second approach is especially recommended, as it allows the team to take on real responsibility. To establish an effective and empowered sustainability team, it is important to give it a clear mandate and strategically introduce work steps, such as stakeholder mapping and analysis.

Identifying relevant actors

For the process to succeed, it is crucial to adopt a systematic approach when forming the team, rather than inviting participants at random. The following guiding questions can help you identify especially relevant participants in the initial step.

Key questions for identifying relevant actors[22]

- **School development processes:** Who is already involved in school development processes, and in which ones?

- **Guiding principles:** Who develops and communicates the school's policies and guidelines?

- **Experience:** Who has worked at the school for a long time and is familiar with past developments?

- **Motivation:** Which staff members show motivation to contribute beyond their regular teaching duties?

- **Expertise:** Who already engages with sustainability-related topics? (Remember: this may include staff from less "obvious" subjects.)

- **Resources:** Who coordinates schedules or manages the school's budget and resources?

- **Collaboration:** Who works well with others, both professionally and personally?

- **Role models:** Which students serve as role models for their peers or represent the student body (e.g., student council members)?

22 Bauer et al. (2011).

- **Student engagement:** Are there student groups focused on sustainability issues (e.g., in a working group) or involved in social or political activities?

- **Parents:** Which parent groups are active in the school? Which parents show interest in school development processes? Which parents engage with sustainability issues through their involvement in school activities (e.g., volunteering in the school canteen)? Which parents have sustainability-related expertise or experiences outside of school that could be useful within the school community?

- **Administration:** Who in the school administration is responsible for building maintenance or organizational tasks?

- **External partners:** Who are important external partners or suppliers for the school (e.g., caterers, service providers)?

The next step is to identify **key actors who could influence the success of your efforts**. This is useful for the sustainability team's activities and for the later implementation of planned measures. Tools such as stakeholder mapping and analysis can help identify the actors relevant to your project and assess their importance in the change process.

Stakeholder mapping and stakeholder analysis

Which stakeholders are essential for a change project in the context of the WSA, and how should they be involved?

A simple way to begin is by asking **what level of influence or interest** actors within the school have in the WSA change project. Depending on how strong these are, different strategies for involvement may be appropriate.

	High level of interest	Low level of interest
High influence	*Involve* the stakeholder	*Convince* the stakeholder
Low influence	*Inform* the stakeholder	*Monitor* the stakeholder

The analysis can be more detailed by considering the following questions:

- What specific interest does the stakeholder have? How can this interest be aligned with the change project in a way that benefits both the project and the stakeholder?

- What exactly is the stakeholder's influence? How can it be used? Or is there another way to achieve the project goals without relying on this person?

Particular attention should be given to two groups:

- **Veto stakeholders:** Which stakeholders have the power to block or prevent the project? How can they be engaged constructively?

- **Critics:** Who are the most vocal critics of the project, and what are their concerns? Depending on the personality and situation, it may be helpful either to counter criticism with well-founded arguments or to reassure these individuals that they are not expected to take action or participate at this stage.

Sustainability team—Tips for efficient organization

The sustainability team is the driving force behind the ESD school development process, providing it with momentum. The following practical tips can help the team organize its work efficiently.

- **Get to know each other:** Take time, if needed, to get acquainted and share your interests and experiences related to sustainability and ESD.

- **Clarify terms:** Encourage team members to discuss what they each mean by "sustainability" and to identify points of shared understanding.

- **Provide information:** Transparency and clear information on upcoming tasks and how to approach them increase the team members' willingness to engage. Present this toolkit to the team and give everyone time to review it at their own pace.

- **Define the team's mission:** Agree on the team's shared mission with input from all members. Ideally, the mission should be endorsed by the staff and the student council. Clear goals and a defined mandate make it easier to plan concrete steps and measures.

- **Schedule regular meetings:** Regular meetings are essential for maintaining momentum. Set dates early to avoid scheduling conflicts and to provide a formal framework for the team. Accommodate members' different needs whenever possible (e. g., suitable times for teachers with children or options that do not require students to sacrifice their free time).

- **Document decisions and outcomes:** Record agreements and results in meeting minutes and share them with all team members and other potentially interested parties. Minutes help track progress, plan next steps, and keep those unable to attend informed.

- **Communicate effectively:** Communication is a key to success, especially within the team. Ensure everyone exchanges contact information and agrees on a shared, reliable communication channel (e. g., email, the school intranet, a group chat, or a bulletin board).

Rotstadt Gymnasium

Forming the sustainability team:
Ms. Röd decides to take a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, she supports students through personal conversations, encouraging them to take initiative by reaching out to her directly with their ideas and suggestions. On the other hand, she establishes a steering group to conduct a systematic status analysis of "participation and democracy," an area in which development needs have been identified. She does not join the steering group herself, allowing her colleagues to conduct independent analysis and initiate discussion among themselves.

Blauburg Primary School

Forming the sustainability team:
Mr. Azul decides not to impose a sustainability team on the skeptical staff. Instead, he first seeks external supporters. He invites a friend, who is also a school leader and has already successfully implemented the WSA at his school, as well as the ESD officer from the school authority, to openly discuss the opportunities and potential of ESD with the staff. He then follows up with individual conversations to address staff concerns about taking on what they see as an "additional topic" in their already demanding workload.

Grünheim High School

Forming the sustainability team:
Ms. Verda decides to establish a sustainability team, initially focusing on a concrete, manageable area of action. The starting point is the students' previously identified dissatisfaction with the school's vocational preparation programs, which they consider outdated. Recognizing that the school cannot make any progress without support, Ms. Verda decides to seek external input. She identifies a vocational training fair, organized by the local Chamber of Commerce, as an opportunity. The sustainability team is given the mandate to work with a Chamber of Commerce representative to explore how eighth-grade students and teachers can participate in preparing the next fair as part of a class project.

2.4 Self-Check: Where Does Your School Stand in Terms of Sustainability?

→ This chapter presents a set of practical self-check tools that enable you and your school community to assess the current status of your school's ESD-related development.

A self-check offers several benefits:

- It can help initiate **dialogue and exchange**, bringing different stakeholder groups into the process, for example, during action or project days, within the school development group, or at school conferences.

- A self-check allows you to **identify and acknowledge** what has already been achieved, while also highlighting areas where further action may still be needed.

- It also makes sense to involve external actors. For example, school leaders from other schools can serve as "critical friends," contributing **fresh perspectives and development ideas** from the outside.

To initiate a conversation about how sustainability can be put into practice at your school, it is important to first assess the initiatives already in place across various areas. The self-check, with its areas of action, is a practical tool for gaining an overview of your current stage of school development. You can also add questions that are especially relevant to your school.

The self-check tool helps you see **where your school currently stands in implementing the WSA**. Based on this, you can outline broad visions and goals for your WSA and design and implement targeted measures (see Appendix ↘ p. 87 ff). As you move into more depth and detail, you can follow up with additional self-check tools tailored to specific areas, concrete goals, or specific measures. For example, in the school's food services: How far along are we in transforming our school's meal offers?

Additional tools for self-checks

- **S3: sustainable school self-evaluation:** This self-evaluation tool for primary, middle and secondary schools provides questions for self-assessment and reflection covering the different areas mentioned in the doorways approach ↘ p. 44.

- **Self-assessment tool on inclusion and wellbeing:** This tool focuses on the school's inclusion policies and practices and on wellbeing. The online application allows for generating a personalized report for the respective school.

- **Tool for democratic school development:** This tool can support your school in planning, monitoring and self-evaluation of education for democratic citizenship and human rights education.

- **Greenhouse gas emissions:** To identify the main sources of your school's emissions, research carbon footprint calculators for schools in your country.

You can use the self-check tool at your school in various ways. For example, it can serve as a **reflection tool for the ESD steering group or the sustainability team**, which could discuss individual areas in more detail during a dedicated reflection session. You can also compare perspectives by having individuals or subgroups complete the self-check separately and then review the results together. The self-check tool can also be used by the **extended school management team**, including student council representatives. Finally, it can serve as a reflection tool for the wider school community, for example, during a school development day.

Distorted world: Cherry-picking, single-action bias, and status-quo preservation

A closer look at school practice shows that sustainability is often approached in a skewed way.[23] For example, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals can tempt schools to focus only on goals that are easy to implement and relatively uncontroversial. This *cherry-picking* can lead to overlooking important sustainability questions, such as how to achieve rapid climate neutrality while also promoting social equality.

People also tend to rely on smaller, visible actions under the motto "We're already doing something," which can discourage taking larger, more impactful measures (a phenomenon known as *single-action bias*). Examples include familiar initiatives such as bee hotels, raised garden beds, or school gardens. While these projects are undoubtedly valuable, they alone do not create a biodiversity- and climate-friendly campus.

People's tendency to prioritize short-term costs and benefits over longer-term ones can lead them to avoid changes, even when they are clearly justified (a tendency known as *status quo bias*). This can result in important investments being postponed or neglected, such as the development of climate-neutral school infrastructure.

The good news is that by becoming aware of these biases, we can counter them by setting appropriate goals, communicating transparently, and taking decisive action.

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23 See Holst et al. (2025) on recurring patterns in school leaders' perspectives on sustainability and see here for an overview of the different biases: https://www.sog.unc.edu/sites/www.sog.unc.edu/files/course_materials/Cognitive%20Biases%20Codex.pdf

Example questions for conducting a self-check: Where does our school stand in terms of sustainability?[24]

The self-check template is provided on ↘ p. 87 ff and is also available online.

Self-check in editable PDF form
↳ Appendix

Planning with the CO_2 school calculator

Effective climate action starts with knowing your school's carbon footprint, in other words, how much CO_2 is being emitted and where those emissions come from. To make collecting and understanding emission data as accurate and straightforward as possible, a CO_2 school calculator can be a helpful tool. We recommend looking for an appropriate CO_2 school calculator in your respective countries.

24 The questions are drawn from the overview of the WSA by Holst (2023).

2.5 Vision-building: How Can You Prepare Your School for the Future?

→ This chapter supports you in initiating the visioning process that will define the long-term goals of your school development process.

The WSA gives schools **the opportunity** to develop a future-oriented vision directly linked to concrete steps for implementation. It is **not an "add-on,"** but can be integrated into existing structures at all levels and across all areas of school development. The vision is always tailored to your school's specific context. It evolves in response to current topics and concerns within the school community.

Implementing the WSA requires strong persuasion and leadership, especially in the early stages. This is made easier by the fact that ESD is becoming increasingly established at all levels of the education system (see Info Box, ↘ p. 15).

You do not need to manage the detailed planning on your own. A range of resources and programs can provide guidance, practical recommendations, and opportunities to network with other school leadership teams. For example, the following may be available in your country or region:

- **ESD advisory services**, hosted by school authorities
- **ESD school certification programs**, such as UNESCO Project Schools, International Sustainability Schools/Environmental Schools in Europe
- **State-level school development programs**
- **Networks of extracurricular educational initiatives**
- **Local education actors and initiatives** already active in your municipality or district.

As the school leader or as part of the school management team, you are responsible for determining how you can begin implementing the WSA, drawing on your familiarity with the school community and local context. Acting simultaneously as a moderator, initiator, and manager, you guide the process. **The first steps are particularly crucial.**

Rotstadt Gymnasium

Initial situation:
The student council of Rotstadt Gymnasium used to be very active, but no longer is. Very few students are still willing to engage in the school community, even though participation is a core value of the school's mission.

First step toward more participation:
Ms. Röd provides the council with a small budget and time off from certain classes. Students are free to choose which project they want to implement during the school year. The student council conducts an online survey of all students to identify what currently prevents them from getting involved. The responses show a strong desire for greater influence in decision-making, and the perception that previous attempts to participate were not systematically embedded in a broader, coherent approach.

The student council decides to organize a project week at the end of the school year, during which the school community will explore issues of democracy and participation in school life. By the end of the week, a concept to increase student participation will be developed and tested in the following school year.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Röd sees herself as an enabler and catalyst. She allows the students to choose their own topics and signals genuine interest in their participation in school life. In regular meetings, she works with them to identify areas where she can support their activities, for example, by making available rooms and materials or by connecting students with external actors or other teachers.

Blauburg Primary School

Initial situation:
Many teachers at Blauburg Primary School report that they do not have time to focus on ESD because other topics feel more urgent.

Goals for implementing the WSA:
Mr. Azul decides to dedicate the next in-school staff training session to ESD to help staff build a shared understanding of the concept. He invites the ESD expert advisory service from the relevant school authority, as well as a speaker from the state-level ESD coordination office. One goal is to explore how ESD aligns with the school's core values—taking responsibility, respecting one another, and hands-on, sensory learning—as outlined in the school's mission statement.

Role of the school leader:
Mr. Azul sees himself as both a source of inspiration and a process owner. For a school to move successfully toward ESD, the staff needs a shared understanding of the concept's potential. In many cases, teachers are already implementing aspects of ESD without explicitly saying so. Once this shared understanding develops, concrete initiatives can follow, such as gradually adapting the internal curriculum or coordinating specific projects and interdisciplinary lessons.

Grünheim High School

Initial situation:
Students at Grünheim High School find the school's career orientation programs, especially the annual vocational training fair organized by the local Chamber of Commerce, old-fashioned and boring. They feel the event does not speak to them as young people. As a result, they show little interest in participating, even though the fair is the only local opportunity for students to engage directly with companies in the region.

Goals for implementing the WSA:
Through the collaboration initiated by Ms. Verda between the school's sustainability team and the Chamber of Commerce, a concrete project has emerged. Eighth-grade students will develop project proposals in their career-oriented elective courses to make the vocational training fair more appealing to young people. During the first half of the school year, students work in small groups to design a concept for a "Future Careers Fair." Each group is supported by a mentor from the Chamber of Commerce who provides guidance and feedback. At the end of the semester, the best ideas are recognized with awards, and, where feasible, implemented in future fairs.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Verda acts as a provider of ideas and facilitates connections with the Chamber of Commerce. To avoid being seen as the sole driver of the project, and to encourage independent engagement, she delegates responsibilities early on to the teachers involved and to the students. The school positions itself as an active member of the local community and strives to contribute to its development.

For more examples on how to get started, see the Starting Points box in Chapter 2.2 ↘ p. 43.

The WSA is a **multi-year process**, with groundwork laid before subsequent steps can follow.

This process can be divided into three phases ↘ p. 39:

- **Vision building** ↘ p. 60
- **Implementation** ↘ p. 62
- **Consolidation** ↘ p. 81

At the outset, the central task is to clarify the school community's long-term aims.

The vision-building phase

Once the decision to move forward with the WSA has been made, all participants need a shared vision. Visions serve as guiding principles or "big goals" that form the basis for concrete sub-goals. They **provide direction for implementing the WSA** and should be developed collaboratively with the entire school community, then adjusted over time as needed.

At the beginning of the vision-building phase, consider which elements of existing projects or concepts, such as the mission statement or school program, you want to **build on**. Discuss these in a general staff meeting or an in-school staff training session. You could start by developing initial proposals for possible visions and ideas for how the entire school community can be involved in the following steps. As a school leader, your role is to act as a **moderator and manager**, ensuring that as many participants as possible can engage in the process.

The vision-building process: Methodological suggestions

Designing the vision-building process in a participatory manner is ambitious and time consuming. You can involve external experts at this stage to help structure and facilitate the process. However, you can also take on the role of facilitator yourself. The following method shows how such a process can be carried out with many participants, including through the use of digital tools:

Dream questions: A low-threshold method that works in both small and very large groups, and can be done with pen and paper or online.

- **Preparation:** First, form a "vision team" to help you in preparing and conducting the survey, and analyzing the responses. Ensure that participation is representative (for example, include staff, students, administrative and janitorial staff, and if appropriate, parents).

- **Implementation:** Pose a "dream question" that all participants answer individually. Possible questions could include, *"Imagine that ten years from now, we have achieved significant progress in sustainable school development. What do you consider the most important change we will have accomplished?" "What makes our school special, and how could we further develop this strength over the next five years?"*

- **Collecting responses:** Responses can be gathered on sticky notes or moderation cards. Alternatively, you can use an online survey tool and share the link with all participants.

- **Analysis:** The vision team reviews and clusters the responses and then develops one or two proposals for a school vision based on them.

A similar method for a visioning exercise is described in detail in the booklet *The Future We Want*, available here.

Some tips for the vision-building phase:

- **Delegate responsibilities:** Your role as a school leader is to inspire, not to handle all tasks alone. For example, form working groups or appoint individuals to take ownership of specific topics and drive them forward independently.

- **Look for local success stories:** Schools in your area that are already implementing the WSA can serve as motivating examples for staff, students, and parents. You could even establish a small competition or set up a "buddy system" in which staff or smaller teams regularly exchange ideas.

- **Avoid overload:** Not everything has to be done at once ↘ p. 62 ff. What matters is to approach the process pragmatically while still ensuring as much participation as possible.

2.6 Implementation: Theory of Change, Backcasting, and Action Planning

→ This chapter presents three example methods you can use to develop concrete action plans for implementing the WSA at your school.

The implementation phase

Once a vision has been formulated, the next step is to translate it into concrete goals. This marks the beginning of the **implementation phase** (see Box in Chapter 2.1 ↘ p. 39).

In this phase, the aim is to implement and further develop goals so that sustainability becomes structurally embedded across all levels of school life over the long term. This phase may take five to seven years. As the school leader, your task is to guide the process with steady, strategic leadership while deliberately involving all relevant stakeholder groups. At the same time, you may need to communicate the measures taken clearly and convincingly, both within the school and to external partners.

The implementation of the WSA can be linked to processes already underway in everyday school life ↘ p. 44. Based on the vision you have developed, you then define a set of goals that build on one another and can be achieved step by step. If your school is already working on specific topics or development projects, it makes sense to integrate them into the WSA. For example, if you aim to strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, ESD-related topics can be gradually incorporated into the curriculum. If a redesign of the schoolyard is being discussed, it may be helpful to carry it out together with students. A needs assessment conducted by students allows them to contribute meaningfully while gaining hands-on experience with survey methods. Or, as part of biology classes, students could create a biotope that links classroom learning with practical action.

Using a theory of change for concrete planning

To plan concrete goals, you first need to clarify the **assumptions** behind your ideas and how you will achieve the **desired outcomes**. One way of doing this is to develop a theory of change, an impact model that maps causal relationships within a change process.

A small group, such as a sustainability team, can take on this task. The process allows previously defined goals to be reviewed and redefined as needed. Another advantage of this method is that it deepens the shared understanding of the goals among all participants.

Impact model: Theory of change

Developing a theory of change takes time, but it is worth the effort. The process helps **make** the **assumptions** behind the change effort **visible**, clarify the goals, and strengthen everyone's shared commitment to achieving them.

A theory of change is a **dynamic model** that can be adjusted as you go. The steps and milestones it outlines help you track progress and make changes as needed.

Step by step instructions for creating a Theory of Change[25]

- Analyze the **starting situation**
- Develop an **approach** based on needs, outputs, outcomes, and long-term impacts
- Establish a **causal chain** (checking assumptions and correlations)
- Identify **allies** and other key actors
- Identify and review **risks and assumptions**
- Define **measures** for evaluation or impact assessment

25 The steps' names differ slightly from the names we use here, yet, the idea behind is the same.

Developing goals using backcasting

A proven method for setting goals and subgoals in school development is backcasting, which involves working backward from a **desired future state to the present**.

The backcasting method

With this method, you determine the steps necessary to achieve a long-term goal by working backward. The advantage is that you **focus on the path to the solution** rather than on potential problems.

1. Visualize the long-term goal.

2. Work backward **step by step** toward the present.

3. At each step, identify which **specific subgoals and actions** must be completed and the timeline for achieving them.

4. The final step identifies the **first concrete action** you will take toward the goal.

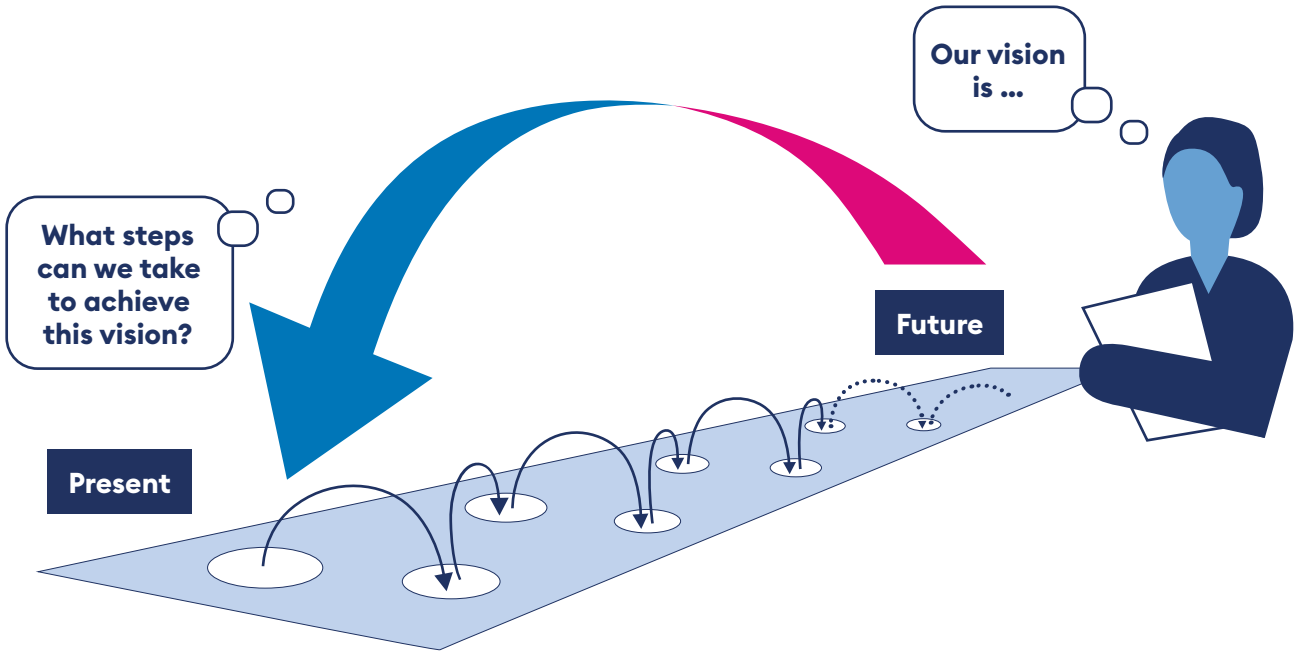

Figure based on: The Natural Step Deutschland, thenaturalstep.de

Example: "Starting next school year, we will introduce a dedicated weekly Sustainability Day (*Frei Day*)."[26]

Working backward, this could be broken down into steps such as:

1. By the end of the current school year, a plan for implementing a Sustainability Day in the following school year will be in place.

2. For the next in-house staff training workshop for teachers at the end of the current semester, a speaker from another school will be invited to share their experiences with a Sustainability Day.

Once your goals are defined, group them into a chronological sequence. You can use the goal matrix and adapt it to your own context (e.g., by including concrete data in the columns).

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26 *Frei Day* is a learning format in which students spend each Friday working collaboratively on self-formulated questions and projects aimed at creating a more sustainable future, instead of following their regular class schedule. The concept was developed by *Schule im Aufbruch*, a German NGO.

WSA School Development Goal Matrix: Toward a School Culture of Sustainability

The goal matrix is provided on ↘ p. 90 and is also available online.

Goal matrix in editable PDF form
↳ Appendix

SMART goal formulation

Once you have defined your goals, check whether they meet the SMART criteria: **specific, measurable, attractive, realistic, and time-bound.**

Adjust your goal formulations if necessary. The more concrete the goals, the easier it is to plan for their achievement and then to evaluate progress.

Specific: A goal should address one clear, concrete objective ("By the end of this school year, we will have introduced a Sustainability Day at our school.").

Measurable: A goal should be measurable using predetermined criteria ("Sustainability Day is scheduled to take place regularly, and everyone involved is familiar with it.").

Attractive: Most, ideally all, participants support the goal and are motivated to contribute to its implementation ("In a survey, the majority of the school community has expressed support for introducing a weekly Sustainability Day.").

Realistic: The goal should be achievable with the resources, time, and support available ("Teachers are given time to plan activities for the weekly Sustainability Day.").

Time-bound: The goal should have a clear timeline or deadline ("Planning for Sustainability Day will begin in September and be completed by October.").

Advice for the implementation phase:

- **Define a concrete goal** for this phase that is derived from the shared vision. For example, "Within five years, our school will have a clear sustainability profile." This goal can be refined and further differentiated over time. Still, it is important to make your intentions transparent to all participants.

- **Set subgoals** that will help achieve the long-term goal, such as:

  → By the end of the next school year, Sustainability Day will be firmly established.

  → At the start of the new school year, we will begin the certification process to become an environmental school.

  → By the end of the next school year, an internal school curriculum for interdisciplinary, project-based learning with a focus on ESD will be in place.

  → By the end of the next school year, at least two long-term collaborations with local extracurricular learning venues (e.g., museums, farm learning venues, nature park centers) will be established, including regular excursions and projects across all grades.

- **Be realistic:** Start the process with one or two small projects to avoid overwhelming yourself and others. Even seemingly modest measures can have a significant impact. Especially at the beginning, it may be helpful to focus on one area (e.g., curriculum development or reducing greenhouse gas emissions) rather than pursuing too many initiatives simultaneously.

- **Build a sense of achievement:** Set goals and choose projects that are feasible and can be completed within the current school year. Early successes motivate participants and increase their willingness to move forward with implementing the WSA (see also the examples of laboratory experiments on the following page).

- **Think holistically:** During the implementation phase, projects should be interconnected rather than exist as isolated efforts.

An initial "**laboratory experiment**,"—a single, clearly defined project—can help kick-start the process and motivate others to participate in future phases of WSA implementation.

Examples of laboratory experiments

A laboratory experiment means implementing a change **on a smaller scale** first, such as a single class or grade, rather than across the entire school. This approach allows room for experimentation, adjustment, and learning from mistakes.

- A first trial of **interdisciplinary teaching** could begin in just one grade level. For example, a topic such as human rights could be explored simultaneously in foreign language, philosophy, and social studies classes.

- **Instead of** making the school kiosk **completely** plastic-free right away, you could start by installing water dispensers and discontinuing the sale of plastic bottles.

- The search for extracurricular partners could begin with small, **targeted projects**, for example, a class working with a local museum on a joint project, or the school garden club partnering with a nearby vegetable farm for one school year.

- You could start integrating ESD into the school's curriculum within **individual subject areas** before expanding it across all subjects.

- Student participation could be strengthened **gradually**. For example, you might begin by working with the student council to identify which project should be prioritized for the current school year. Students could take on a greater role in redesigning the schoolyard, with participation formats developed specifically for this purpose.

- Becoming a climate-neutral school is a long-term effort and cannot be achieved in a single year. **A first step** could be to conduct assessments with students and building management staff during class, for instance, to identify potential energy savings.

As a school leader or member of the school management team, **your role is to moderate** the process, bring together different perspectives, and ensure that goals are clearly defined and followed through. You also **guide** the process when decisions need to be made, even when consensus among participants may not be possible. Your **ability to strike the right balance** is particularly important when fostering a constructive approach to errors. Such an approach is essential for implementing the WSA. One of the core principles of ESD is recognizing that errors are inevitable and necessary for learning. **There are no ready-made solutions.** Every school is unique, and only by learning from our mistakes can we maintain our capacity to act effectively.

Rotstadt Gymnasium

Goal definition:
For some time now, individual teachers in the social and natural sciences at Rotstadt Gymnasium have been exploring ways to expand interdisciplinary teaching.

First step:
Ms. Röd proposes forming a working group to develop a pilot curriculum for interdisciplinary ESD project work in the lower grades, focusing on "*Sustainability past, present, and future*." In addition to geography, subjects such as history, politics, and biology are involved. The group's goal is for students to present the results of the pilot project on interdisciplinary teaching to the public in an interactive exhibition by the end of the next school year.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Röd facilitates the working group's progress and receives regular updates. If the work stalls, she provides support by asking guiding questions and encouraging colleagues to continue. In this process, she acts as an enabler.

Blauburg Primary School

Goal definition:
Blauburg Primary School aims to integrate environmental education into its regular curriculum, as many children have little connection to local flora and fauna.

First step:
Mr. Azul supports the school's newly founded ESD working group by securing funding from a local foundation. This makes it possible to establish a long-term partnership with an extracurricular learning venue in a nearby nature reserve. In the coming school year, all third-grade classes will have a day of outdoor lessons each week.

Role of the school leader:
Mr. Azul acts as a supporter and resource provider. He encourages staff to involve external educators and works to secure a budget that provides planning security through the end of the school year.

Grünheim High School

Goal definition:
Grünheim High School seeks to establish an international school partnership to help students develop intercultural skills and to make links between local and global issues more tangible for the school community.

First step:
Through the local church, the religion teacher, Mr. Organ, has contact with a school in Kenya that is also based in a rural community. Ms. Verda, the school leader, supports his idea of forming a working group that will initially design virtual exchange formats and later expand to face-to-face exchanges. During the school year, students from both schools will create virtual tours of their campuses to get to know one another. Grünheim students have proposed founding a student company to sell fair trade products from Kenya in cooperation with the local world shop. Ms. Verda also supports this initiative, and a second working group will be launched in the coming school year.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Verda acts as both the initiator and the supporter. By showing genuine interest and providing time and resources, she encourages and sustains the commitment of both staff and students.

For successful implementation, it is helpful to build alliances with partners both within and outside the school community ↘ p. 46 ff.

The Individualization trap and the importance of systemic action

A persistent assumption in schools is that the crises of unsustainability can be solved solely through changes in individual behavior. The "individualization trap" refers to the tendency to reduce ecological and social problems to the moral conduct of individuals (e.g., waste sorting, meat consumption, or bicycle use). Research shows that while educational programs frequently link the consequences of the climate crisis to society as a whole, responsibility for solutions is often shifted onto individuals.[27] Although personal behavior matters, focusing on it alone is insufficient. Systemic causes, such as power relations and structural or institutional conditions, risk being pushed into the background.

The individualization trap can also lead to feelings of powerlessness, especially among children and young people who, unlike today's adults, are not yet in a position to address the sustainability crisis. Such a narrative can obscure collective options for action, leading students to see themselves not as socially effective actors but merely as consumers. Implementing ESD as a WSA, therefore, means intentionally incorporating collective, political, and structural levels of action (see above). In this way, sustainability is no longer framed as an individual burden, but as a shared endeavor.

27 See for example: Kranz et al. (2022).

2.7 Celebrate Successful Implementation

→ This chapter highlights the value of perseverance so that successes, even those resulting from small steps, can be celebrated.

Once you have defined concrete goals and initiated initial measures, it is essential to maintain momentum. Sustained effort **keeps those involved motivated** and **generates the energy needed** for additional projects, whose successful implementation should also be celebrated.

At this stage, the school leader's role is primarily that of a **communicator**. Sharing the successful implementation of measures within the school and with the broader community helps strengthen existing collaborations. It can also attract new partners beyond the school.

Resources for sustainability in school development

In everyday school life, the question often arises: Where can we find additional resources for structural measures that support greater sustainability? The examples below show possible options for schools to explore.

Mobilization of local and regional resources

Collaboration with local foundations and companies, as well as regional crowdfunding initiatives, can provide not only **new sources of funding** but also **expertise** and ideas for future-oriented school development tailored to local needs. Additional **funding for ESD and sustainability** can also be accessed through participation in competitions or state-specific funding opportunities. Many regions also have networking offices or dedicated officers within state ministries for ESD and sustainability, who can provide guidance on regional funding opportunities.

Possible co-benefits: WSA, digitalization, and inclusion

A school development process aligned with ESD can link **digitalization and inclusion closely with sustainability**, especially when these areas are seen as opportunities to foster a fair, participatory, and future-ready school (Rončević & Schulz, 2024). This involves not only creating energy-efficient and long-lasting systems but also providing accessible digital platforms that enable personalized learning and new forms of inclusive collaboration.

At the same time, schools must consider the risks associated with digitalization and foster critical digital literacy among learners, particularly with regard to focus, social skills, and the societal and ecological impacts of digital technologies. The WSA can provide valuable guidance for establishing a participatory, critical, and sustainable approach to digitalization in schools. Successful, ESD-oriented school development therefore integrates digitalization and inclusion, two topics that have gained significant relevance in recent years. Through the WSA, particular attention is given to cultivating an inclusive, future-ready learning culture that empowers all members of the school community to take an active role in shaping a sustainable and just world.

Rotstadt Gymnasium

Milestone reached:
The first pilot project for interdisciplinary learning in the lower grades of Rotstadt Gymnasium was successfully implemented. Students and teachers reported largely positive results and agreed that interdisciplinary learning should be expanded to all grades in the coming years.

Celebrating success:
Ms. Röd secured coverage of the project in the local newspaper, and the local TV station also aired a feature. The project will continue in the new school year and be expanded to the middle grades.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Röd identified prominent communication channels early on to showcase the success of the pilot project to the broader public. The positive response motivated staff to continue developing interdisciplinary curricula.

Blauburg Primary School

Milestone reached:
Blauburg Primary School participated in the city's climate competition, which used a point system to determine which school saved the most energy. The school won second place and was awarded 1,000 euros. A group of student representatives accepted the award, and the local newspaper published a detailed article highlighting the school's commitment.

Celebrating success:
Mr. Azul responded promptly to the city's invitation to take part in the competition. He motivated the staff by pointing out that the prize money would allow the school to finally carry out the long-awaited project week with a non-governmental partner. At the end of the project week, the school held a large festival where the school community presented its achievements to the public through exhibitions, schoolyard tours, and performances.

Role of the school leader:
Mr. Azul actively sought funding opportunities and involved the school community in decision-making. He also ensured that the school's successes were communicated to the broader public.

Grünheim High School

Milestone reached:
For the first time in four years, Grünheim High School saw an increase in enrollment for the new school year. Parents attributed this to the school's collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce on redesigning the vocational training fair, which received positive coverage in the local press, and to the Chamber's more contemporary approach to engaging young people.

Celebrating success:
Through her contacts at the Chamber of Commerce, Ms. Verda secured local sponsors who donated regional food and drinks. At the school's graduation event before the summer holidays, she thanked the school community for their commitment and ideas, which helped the school present itself more positively both internally and externally. During the event, Ms. Verda, together with the sustainability team and student representatives, announced the launch of a new student-run business selling fair trade products in the coming school year.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Verda acted cooperatively, acknowledging that the school's successes were the result of the efforts of all parties involved—teachers, students, administrative staff, parents, and external partners. She celebrated their contributions and is now working to ensure that the school's successful cooperation projects continue.

2.8 Evaluate and Continue Planning

→ This chapter highlights the importance of evaluating achievements to sustain them and plan the next steps in implementing the WSA.

To effectively **manage the implementation** of the WSA, **identify successes**, and **make adjustments** as needed, evaluation measures are essential. Even before the implementation phase begins, it is advisable to consider how lessons learned can inform future steps. The planning tools introduced earlier can provide a solid data foundation for this purpose. A good practice is to schedule regular reviews of the project process, for example, during steering team meetings. If additional support with the evaluation is desired, in some countries, external audits can also be requested, for example, from organizations that conduct ESD school certification programs.

Beyond formal evaluation, school management teams need to model and promote an **open, positive culture of error**. Some practical tips:

- Expect failures. Mistakes are inevitable when implementing a WSA, and they provide valuable **learning opportunities**. What matters is to stay focused on your ultimate goals.

- **Communicate openly**. Make it clear that mistakes are expected and even welcomed. All parties involved may learn more from errors than from a flawless implementation.

- Act early. Don't wait for problems to arise! Use simple evaluation tools to **monitor ongoing processes**. Address issues or early signs of dissatisfaction promptly. Encourage participants to persist where possible; however, in some cases, a project may need to be canceled. Waiting too long can lead to frustration and negatively affect the overall process.

Rotstadt Gymnasium

Conclusion:
A participatory learning culture has taken shape at Rotstadt Gymnasium in recent years. Students are now involved in all school development processes, most recently in the planning and construction of the new school canteen in collaboration with the municipal school authority.

Next steps:
Participation formats successfully tested at the school will now be more widely incorporated into district-level and municipal youth programs. To support this, the student council, the democracy working group, and the school social work team are organizing a Youth Utopia Conference on the school campus, open to all young people in the district. The goal of the event is to develop projects that create more recreational opportunities for young people, making the region more appealing to them. In addition, activities will be designed to inspire young people to become more socially engaged.

Unfortunately, the planning group had not anticipated that a music festival would be taking place at the same time. Attendance fell far short of expectations. In the evaluation, students acknowledged that they had overlooked the scheduling conflict and concluded that the next event should be held in the morning rather than on a Friday afternoon.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Röd has noticed a significant increase in student engagement since the school began integrating more participatory formats into everyday school life. She builds on these successes by opening the school to the broader community. Her role is that of a networker who fosters internal trust and delegates responsibility. At the same time, she remains visible as a guiding force, willing to let others take the lead, but always ready to step in if needed.

After attendance at the Youth Utopia Conference proved lower than expected, she stepped in as a motivator. She praised the students for their commitment and encouraged them to think about how the next event could be improved to attract more young people from outside the school.

Blauburg Primary School

Conclusion:
The development work of recent years at Blauburg Primary School has yielded results. The staff supports the WSA, but active involvement remains limited, even though teachers are generally satisfied with it.

Next steps:
To maintain the positive momentum and encourage greater staff involvement in the WSA, Mr. Azul has compiled a list of recent measures. He will conduct an anonymous survey to gather detailed staff feedback on the current state of school development. After reviewing the results, he will present them to the staff and work with them to determine the order in which proposed school development measures should be implemented in the coming school year.

One proposal has been particularly well received: joining an ESD certification program. This would give the school access to expert guidance, a professional network, and the opportunity to showcase its achievements externally through regular recertification, while also generating fresh momentum within the school for advancing the implementation of the WSA. A school certification working group will be established to recommend which program the school should apply to.

Role of the school leader:
Mr. Azul values the staff's commitment and takes their feedback seriously. He welcomes the proposal and the decision to bring in external support through the certification program. Guidance from program experts will ease his workload and help maintain the motivation of everyone involved. ESD certification will also boost the school's reputation by generating positive recognition both inside and outside the school.

Conclusion:
The annual vocational training fair organized by the Grünheim Chamber of Commerce has undergone a significant transformation since the collaboration began four years ago. Involving Grünheim High School students in planning and evaluating the event has become an integral part of the curriculum. Other schools report that their students return from the fair with increased interest. Students tell their teachers and parents that, thanks to the practice-oriented lessons and collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, they now have a better understanding of how the school connects to their future professional lives.

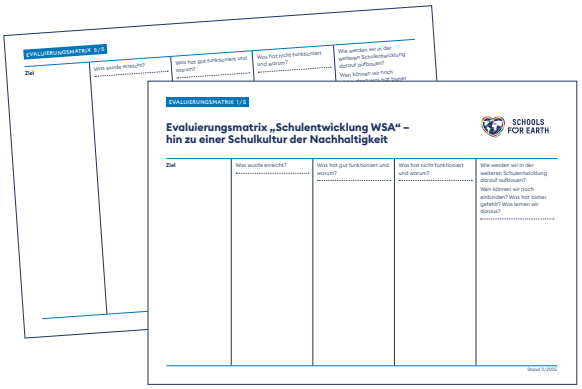
Next steps:
The local tourism association has been looking to reposition itself for some time. Its goal is to make the region more attractive to families and young people while highlighting regional and sustainable values. On the initiative of two teachers, the high school is participating in a two-year pilot project. As part of this, middle school students help develop family-friendly tourist activities, with a particular focus on affordability for families with limited budgets.

Role of the school leader:
Ms. Verda recognizes the success of the project, which began as a pilot in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce. To better understand what students found most valuable, she invited all class representatives to discuss the completed measures and share their ideas for the future. The students' feedback shows that this type of practical collaboration meets their needs, and teachers also report growing interest and commitment in their classes. In response, Ms. Verda has signaled to external partners that she is open to further collaboration. She supports staff and students in independently reaching out to potential networks and partners. She knows the process is not yet firmly established and still requires her guidance, but she places her trust in everyone involved.

A straightforward way to evaluate progress is to reflect on the goals you and your school community have achieved, what has worked well, and what lessons you have learned from mistakes. Building on this, you can define goals. Your experiences also allow you to tailor future processes more effectively to your school's local context. A simple matrix can help you do this.

Evaluation matrix for WSA school development: Toward a school culture of sustainability

The evaluation matrix is provided on ↘ p. 93 and is also available online.


EVALUIERUNGSMATRIX 1/5

Evaluierungsmatrix „Schulentwicklung WSA" – hin zu einer Schulkultur der Nachhaltigkeit

SCHOOLS FOR EARTH

Ziel	Was wurde erreicht?	Was hat gut funktioniert und warum?	Was hat nicht funktioniert und warum?	Wie werden wir in der weiteren Schulentwicklung darauf aufbauen? Wen können wir noch einbinden? Was hat bisher gefehlt? Was lernen wir daraus?

Evaluation matrix in editable PDF form
↳ Appendix

Ideally, evaluation should be **participatory**. As suggested in the vision-building process (see *Dream Questions*, ↘ p. 60), this can be done either on paper or through an online survey. You could complete the evaluation matrix together with the staff during a conference and discuss their experiences. Students can also evaluate measures, either as the whole student body or through small projects in their regular classes.

The consolidation phase

Evaluation is already important during the implementation phase, as each measure should be reviewed to determine whether its objectives have been achieved. This is essential for **maintaining progress** and **anchoring the WSA over the long term**. Over time, the implementation phase gradually transitions into a consolidation phase. The transition is **fluid**, and you may notice you have reached this phase when long-term goals have been achieved or when you feel the need to revise an earlier vision.

Is the school now climate-neutral? Does the internal curriculum include ESD references across all grades and subjects? In the consolidation phase, it may be time to initiate a new vision process. Surely there are already new topics and concerns that matter to you and the school community.

Now that you and your school community have gained substantial experience in implementing the WSA, it makes sense to **formalize** the continuation of school development in relevant documents, such as the school profile or the medium- and long-term school development plans. This step helps consolidate the progress already made. It provides a clear, structured way to define and plan concrete steps for the coming years.

Advice for the consolidation phase

- **One goal leads to the next:** Once WSA implementation has stabilized, begin a new long-term vision development process. Ask: What have we achieved? What has proven successful? What should be developed further in the coming years?

- **Continue delegating:** By now, you know who is committed to specific issues. Encourage these stakeholders to continue contributing to the shared vision.

Appendix

References
Recommended Reading
Reproducible Materials

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Recommended reading is highlighted in bold

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Reproducible Materials

The three templates that follow are also available online as fillable PDF forms:

Editable PDF forms
↳ Appendix

SELF-CHECK 1/3

Where does our school stand in terms of sustainability?[1]

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ESD in curriculum and learning 	To what extent are sustainability-related questions and challenges addressed across subjects? How can sustainability and ESD be more deeply integrated into the school's internal curricula for each subject?	To what extent is learning about topics such as climate protection and social justice linked to practical activities in the classroom? How can we create opportunities, for example, in the local community or on the school campus, that enable teachers to align their lessons with specific sustainability topics?	To what extent does teaching at our school foster critical and systemic thinking, as well as the ability to navigate conflicting goals?	How do we, as the school leader and the school management team, foster and enable interdisciplinary learning, both through project-based approaches and as an integral part of everyday school life?
Participatory and proactive governance 	To what extent do we, as school leaders and the school management team, actively promote sustainability and ESD at our school?	To what extent do we support and encourage participation and co-creation by students, teachers, non-teaching staff (e.g., caretakers, office staff, school social workers), parents, the school authority, and, where applicable, other stakeholder groups in and around the school?	Do we have an action plan for sustainability and ESD that we implement collectively and evaluate regularly?	To what extent is sustainability already a core part of school development? Is there a dedicated steering or coordination team for this purpose?

1 The self-check questions are based on the systematic review on the WSA by Holst (2023).

SELF-CHECK 2/3

Sustainable operations and campus management 	To what extent do we focus on using less resources–such as energy and water–in construction projects and daily operations (e.g., procurement, mobility)? Do we regularly monitor and evaluate our use of resources? To what extent do we involve the school authority in these efforts?	What measures does our school take to protect and promote biodiversity on the grounds (e.g., school gardens or green façades)? How do we, as the school leader and school management team, incentivize these efforts and embed them structurally?	Are our school grounds designed to be fully accessible (e.g., for wheelchair users or people with visual impairments) and free of discrimination?	Is sustainability a priority in our school kitchen?
Embedded in community and networks 	To what extent do we involve members of the local community in sustainability learning (e.g., through projects with businesses or individuals engaged in community groups or NGOs)? How actively do we, as the school leader and the school management team, promote cooperation with regional stakeholders?	How closely do we collaborate with other educational institutions in the region (e.g., associations, extracurricular educational partners)?	To what extent do we work together with other schools on sustainability topics and initiatives?	To what extent does our school contribute to sustainability in the local community (e.g., through volunteer projects or civic engagement)?

SELF-CHECK 3/3

Sustainable capacity building 	To what extent do we acknowledge and support staff in their commitment to sustainability?	To what extent do we offer professional development that enables staff to build the skills and knowledge needed to teach and practice ESD and sustainability? What sustainability-related training opportunities do we provide for non-teaching staff?	Are supportive working conditions, such as sufficient time, appropriate materials, and access to support programs, in place to ensure quality education?	How do we make it attractive for staff to further their qualifications and engage in sustainability, and what incentives do we provide?
Active communication on sustainability 	To what extent does our school communicate clearly and consistently on sustainability (e.g., on the website, in newsletters, on social media, and at events)?	Are there regular opportunities at our school for students, staff, and community partners to exchange ideas about sustainability? How can we create time and space for these exchanges?	Are the sustainability activities at our school clearly visible both inside and outside the school?	To what extent do we, as the school's leadership, make our commitment to sustainability visible within the school?
Sustainable school culture 	To what extent is sustainability "normal" at our school, meaning a natural part of how people think and act?	To what extent does our school serve as a role model for sustainability?	To what extent do we practice solidarity and show a mindful, respectful approach to people and the environment at our school?	To what extent do our school rituals (e.g., start-of-year ceremonies, in assemblies, regular events) reflect our sustainability values?

SCHOOLS FOR EARTH

WSA school development goal matrix: Toward a school culture of sustainability

ESD in curriculum and learning 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**
Participatory and proactive governance 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**

GOAL MATRIX 2/3

Sustainable operations and campus management 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**
Embedded in community and networks 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**
Sustainable capacity building 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**

GOAL MATRIX 3/3

Active communication on sustainability 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**
Sustainable school culture 	**Short-term goals**	**Medium-term goals**	**Long-term goals**

EVALUATION MATRIX

Evaluation matrix for WSA school development: Toward a school culture of sustainability

SCHOOLS FOR EARTH

Goal	What have we achieved?	What worked well, and why?	What didn't work, and why?	How will we build on this in further school development? Who else can we involve? What has been missing so far? What do we learn from this?

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