

# CREATING GREEN AND HEALTHY SCHOOLS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

## POLICY BRIEF

### MAKING EVERY SCHOOL A HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL

Children and young people across Europe are growing up in a changing world, impacted by the realities of climate change, environmental degradation, and persistent health inequalities.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the views of nine in ten young Europeans, who believe that addressing climate change would enhance their wellbeing. Their view highlights the strong link between environmental sustainability and lifelong health.<sup>2</sup>

Schools hold a unique position of being able to raise awareness and engage in health and sustainability issues from an early age.<sup>3</sup> While many schools are already taking on this responsibility by introducing health and environmental initiatives, joint action across these disciplines is often limited due to the nature of education frameworks and funding structures.

In fact, many education systems treat health promotion and sustainability as separate domains<sup>4</sup> and do not recognise the potential of addressing and including these topics in a more integrated manner in core curricula. This disconnect can result in fragmented approaches and missed opportunities for greater collective impact.

**This challenge reveals a deeper issue: current education systems are often ill-equipped to respond to today's complex social and environmental realities.** The dominant focus remains on preparing students for today's labour markets, rather than on fostering critical thinking and engagement about pressing social and ecological concerns. Consequently, mainstream education tends to perpetuate unsustainable behaviours and entrenched inequalities instead of empowering learners to question and transform them.<sup>4</sup>





Addressing this requires a fresh perspective on the role of education as a catalyst for meaningful change. While education alone cannot resolve these challenges, its transformative potential depends on breaking away from narrow disciplinary approaches to bring together different fields of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This calls for supportive policies, targeted professional development, and strong collaboration across sectors. Achieving the aspirations of today's youth for a healthier, more just future relies on systems that work together to enable schools to lead the way.

*“What is needed is education and learning that transforms rather than replicates existing patterns of injustice and inequality, and unhealthy lifestyles and environments.”*

*Davis, J. & Cooke, S. (2007)*

## What is needed to better align health and sustainability goals in education?

Health and sustainability are inherently interconnected, and schools are ideally placed to strengthen this relationship. Through initiatives such as school gardens, green play areas, and walking buses,\* they can simultaneously reduce environmental footprints and promote physical activity, mental wellbeing, and community connection.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, schools can help reimagine and reshape how societies and economies can function—demonstrating the long-term value of investing in the conditions that support both human and planetary health.



Achieving more integrated approaches to human and planetary health requires enhanced coordination among health, education, and environmental authorities to harmonise policies and develop supportive frameworks for schools.<sup>7</sup> Essential actions include allocating funding for whole-school programmes, removing regulatory obstacles to experiential learning, and investing in professional development that promotes cross-disciplinary, participatory teaching methods. International frameworks such as the Health Promoting Schools<sup>8</sup> approach provide a valuable model to guide this shift towards better alignment on health and sustainability in education.

\* A walking bus is a group of children walking to school together along a set route, supervised by adults, promoting safety, physical activity, and reduced traffic.



## Health Promoting Schools: a practical foundation to achieve a 'triple-win' for health, equity, and environmental sustainability in education

Building schools that are both healthy and sustainable is essential to tackle today's interrelated, urgent environmental and social challenges. The Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework offers a robust, evidence-based model for integrating health and sustainability into the fabric of school life.<sup>9</sup> Grounded in principles of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment, HPS promotes a whole-school strategy that extends beyond classroom learning, influencing school policies, physical environments, and community partnerships.<sup>4</sup>



The Health Promoting Schools approach can help students and staff improve health, equity, and environmental outcomes simultaneously, leading to a 'triple-win' in all of these areas. Practical initiatives such as green gyms and school gardens have been especially effective in engaging students who may struggle in traditional classroom settings. Healthy eating efforts can also be broadened to include activities like 'Meat-Free Mondays' and programmes aimed at reducing food waste and single-use plastics, reinforcing sustainable habits alongside healthy ones.<sup>10</sup>

Efforts to boost outdoor learning and green space development can equally promote mental wellbeing and social connection<sup>11</sup> in schools. These integrated approaches enable schools to act as hubs for social and environmental transformation, reinforcing healthy behaviours alongside sustainable practices.

HPS approaches also emphasise participatory, student-centred learning.<sup>12</sup> Students are encouraged to take an active role in identifying challenges and leading initiatives, whether through peer health campaigns, environmental audits, or local advocacy. This hands-on, real-world engagement not only enhances learning outcomes but also builds civic skills and a sense of agency.

To support implementation, national and regional policies must embed HPS principles into education strategies, curriculum design, and teacher standards. Capacity building for educators, coordinated cross-sector support, and sustained investment in school environments are all critical to success.<sup>13</sup> When well supported and implemented, the HPS approach does not just prepare students for the future but empowers them to shape it.



## Connections between Health Promoting Schools and green school initiatives

Health Promoting School initiatives have a lot in common with the green school initiatives that are gaining momentum in many countries.<sup>4</sup> The table below outlines their key features and common principles of both approaches.

Dimension	Health Promoting Schools approach	Green initiatives	Shared principles
Educational approach	Action-oriented, participatory, and student-centred learning focused on health and wellbeing	Students are meaningfully involved in education on sustainability through hands-on experiences	Promote transformative learning that empowers students to take real-life action
Whole-school strategy	Integrates health into curriculum, policies, environment, and community partnerships	Embeds sustainability across the curriculum, school management, operations, and community	Emphasise a whole-school approach as essential to cultural change
Focus areas	Physical and mental health, wellbeing, healthy behaviours, resilience	Environmental stewardship, climate action, and sustainable living practices	Address complex, real-world challenges affecting students and communities
School environment	Promotes safe, inclusive, and health-supportive spaces (e.g., green schoolyards)	Focuses on eco-friendly infrastructure, waste reduction, and energy use	Links the school environment with wellbeing, behaviour, and learning outcomes
Curriculum integration	Health is taught as a cross-curricular theme	Sustainability is integrated across subjects, often through interdisciplinary projects	Support cross-curricular learning linked to broader frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals
Student empowerment	Develops student voice, agency, and leadership in health initiatives	Engages students in school decision-making and local environmental action	Encourages students to be active citizens and change agents
Community engagement	Involves parents, local health services, and the broader community in promoting student wellbeing	Builds partnerships with environmental organisations, local government, and communities	Encourages schools as hubs of community engagement and co-learning

Aligning health promoting and green school initiatives<sup>14</sup> can create even stronger approaches in schools to tackle the interconnected challenges of student wellbeing, social equity, and environmental sustainability.



# Leveraging policies and initiatives to encourage joint action on health and environmental sustainability in schools\*

## Global strategies and initiatives

UNESCO has developed several initiatives, focusing on sustainability in schools:

- The **FRESH framework**<sup>15</sup> (Focusing Resources on Effective School Health) is an inter-agency initiative developed by UNESCO, together with WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. Launched in 2000, it provides a comprehensive approach to school health, focusing on four core areas: school health policies; water, sanitation, and the environment; skills-based health education; and school-based health and nutrition services.
- **UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development for 2030 Programme**<sup>16</sup> emphasises a whole-system approach to environmental education, integrating sustainability across curricula, teacher training, and community engagement.
- **UNESCO's Green School Quality Standard**<sup>17</sup> provides a global framework for transforming schools into climate-resilient learning environments. It outlines core areas for integrating sustainability principles and climate action, including the creation of green governance committees involving students, teachers, and parents; and energy efficiency audits.
- **UNESCO's Greening Education Partnership**<sup>18</sup> is a global initiative that supports countries in tackling the climate crisis through education. As a collaborative platform for governments and other stakeholders, the partnership encourages the greening of schools, curricula, teacher training, and communities.

## EU Initiatives

- The **Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development**<sup>19</sup> supports EU Member States in strengthening competences in sustainability, as part of education and training. To support the implementation of this recommendation, a **Working Group on Learning for Sustainability**<sup>20</sup> was set up by the European Commission, promoting mutual learning and exchange on sustainability education in schools.
- The **European Competence Framework on Sustainability (GreenComp)**<sup>21</sup> is a tool for educators to develop and assess sustainability competences in learners.
- As one of its priorities,<sup>22</sup> the **Erasmus+ programme**<sup>23</sup> seeks to integrate sustainability and the green transition into its framework by supporting projects on environmental protection and sustainable practices in educational settings.
- The **Education for Climate Coalition**<sup>24</sup> brings together pupils, students, teachers, and organisations active on climate change and sustainability. It aims to foster a participatory approach to education for the green transition and sustainable development.
- The **EU Learning Corner**<sup>25</sup> provides teaching and learning materials for primary and secondary schools, covering topics related to the EU's role in various areas, including the environment, climate, and energy.<sup>26</sup> The platform helps educators teach students about the EU's roles, responsibilities, and impact on key issues.

\* While the following examples focus primarily on sustainability initiatives in schools, they provide a useful entry point for exploring how such efforts can also promote health-related outcomes.



## Examples of promising initiatives

### FINLAND – Cross-curricular sustainability and health integration



In Finland, sustainability and wellbeing are embedded within the National Core Curriculum as cross-cutting themes that guide all aspects of school life.<sup>27</sup> Rather than treating health and environmental education as separate subjects, Finnish schools integrate them into daily teaching and the broader school culture. Topics such as climate change, ecological responsibility, nutrition, physical activity, and mental health are taught through project-based and inquiry-driven learning. For instance, schools often combine gardening activities with lessons on healthy eating and environmental stewardship, reinforcing a systems-thinking approach. Teachers are supported through continuous professional development and national resources, and student participation in school planning and evaluation is encouraged.

### ITALY – Including sustainability in the school curriculum as part of national legislation



In 2020, Italy passed a law<sup>28</sup> to mandate climate change and sustainable development education in all schools for students aged 3 to 19. It requires schools to dedicate approximately 33 hours per academic year (around one hour per week) to these topics. Rather than being taught as standalone subjects, the content is integrated across disciplines such as geography, mathematics, physics, and civic education, in alignment with the UN Agenda 2030 goals. The initiative aims to promote more integrated teaching and research approaches and was championed by Professor Lorenzo Fioramonti, Italy's Minister of Education in 2019 and a leading advocate of the Economy of Wellbeing<sup>29</sup> movement.

### NETHERLANDS – Integrating environment and sustainability into Health Promoting Schools



In the Netherlands, the Healthy School Programme,<sup>30</sup> which has traditionally focused on nutrition, physical activity, and mental wellbeing, is expanding to include environmental and sustainability themes. This shift is part of a national effort to encourage schools to address a broader range of wellbeing issues, including ecological health.

A clear example of this integration of health and sustainability is the 'Let's go outside for tasty food! (Lekker naar buiten!) programme, which promoted healthy eating among young children. Over three years, 2,273 schools applied for funding, and 1,177 schools received up to EUR 2,000. Participating schools reported that the programme helped students gain practical experience with sustainable food through activities like gardening, cooking, and farm visits. Many of these schools expressed a desire to continue focusing on healthy eating. They were encouraged to do so through the support of the Healthy School Programme, which provides a structured approach to addressing topics such as nutrition, the environment, and nature.<sup>31</sup>



## GREECE – Centre for Environmental Education and district-level sustainability coordinators



The Center for Environmental Education and Sustainability (CEES),<sup>32</sup> under the Ministry of Education, focuses on promoting environmental awareness through education at local, national, and international levels. It organises professional development programmes for educators, helping them integrate environmental education into school curricula. Greece has also developed a structure to support district-level sustainability by appointing sustainability coordinators<sup>33</sup> who serve as intermediaries between national policymakers and schools. These coordinators play a crucial role in translating policy into practice.

These structures, which enhance professional development and local support, also have the potential to improve health outcomes, as they align with the core pillars of the Health Promoting School approach—emphasising skill development and strong community partnerships through systemic support.

## HUNGARY – Green kindergartens



The Hungarian Green Kindergarten Network,<sup>34</sup> coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture, connects over 1000 kindergartens.<sup>35</sup> The Green Kindergarten programme aims to foster environmental awareness in 3 to 6-year-old children through experience-based activities, collaborating with educators, parents, and local communities, to create a more sustainable surrounding environment. Each year, kindergartens can apply to join the Green Kindergarten framework, with successful applicants earning the title for three years.

Sustainability programmes like Hungary's Green Kindergartens strengthen community ties, providing a foundation to enhance children's wellbeing through environmental awareness.



# Calls to action to unify the concepts of health promoting schools and green schools into a holistic vision

Schools are uniquely positioned to respond to the urgent social, environmental, and health challenges facing children and young people today. Education systems must therefore evolve to equip them with the knowledge, skills, resources, and agency needed to achieve a 'triple-win', advancing health, equity, and environmental sustainability.

Aligning health and sustainability within school systems, both in curriculum and daily practice, is essential to realising this potential. The following recommendations offer actions for policymakers, educators, and school leaders to support this shift and create learning environments that promote wellbeing for people and planet alike.

## 1. Embed health and sustainability as core, integrated curriculum priorities

**CONTEXT:** Education systems must move beyond fragmented approaches and prepare students to understand and respond to today's interconnected social, environmental, and health challenges.

### **ACTIONS:**

- Recognising the link between disciplines, policymakers are encouraged to mandate health and sustainability as cross-cutting themes within national and regional curricula.
- The education and training sector (e.g., curriculum developers and teacher education institutions) should consider developing or strengthening interdisciplinary teaching units that link climate, biodiversity, and pollution with topics such as nutrition, physical health, and mental wellbeing.
- Schools can leverage comprehensive frameworks, such as the Health Promoting Schools approach, to integrate health, environmental sustainability, and wellbeing across the curriculum, school culture, and community partnerships—using shared indicators to track progress and impact.

## 2. Build cross-sector structures for integrated school policy

**CONTEXT:** To overcome siloed approaches, authorities in health, education, and the environment must coordinate efforts and align funding and frameworks.

### **ACTIONS:**

- Set up inter-ministerial working groups (involving Health, Education, and Environment ministries) to co-design and align school policies that integrate student wellbeing with environmental sustainability.
- Provide dedicated funding to schools for joint health-environment initiatives, such as developing green schoolyards, implementing clean air measures, and expanding access to healthy, climate-friendly meals.
- Develop and implement a common set of indicators—in collaboration with education authorities and schools—to monitor how integrated school-based actions are improving student health and environmental outcomes.



### 3. Empower students as agents of change

**CONTEXT:** Students are calling for action on climate and health, and when meaningfully involved, they contribute to stronger school ownership, improved wellbeing, and deeper civic engagement. Schools and education authorities must create inclusive spaces that empower students to lead and take action.

**ACTIONS:**

- Create formal structures for student participation, such as eco-health councils or student-led committees, that have an authentic voice in shaping school decisions on sustainability, health, and wellbeing.
- Integrate participatory practices—including workshops, assemblies, and surveys—into school planning processes, ensuring students actively contribute to setting priorities and developing action plans.
- Support and showcase youth-led projects that connect environmental goals with health outcomes, such as improving green spaces for mental wellbeing



### 4. Invest in teacher and school leader capacity for whole-school action

**CONTEXT:** Teachers and leaders are vital to shifting school culture and practice, yet many lack training and support to work across disciplines. Education ministries, teacher training institutions, and school leadership bodies, therefore, need to work closely together to provide the necessary tools and conditions for teachers to increase their capacity in health and environmental action.

**ACTIONS:**

- Integrate health and sustainability education into initial teacher training and leadership development programmes, with dedicated modules, practice opportunities, and assessment criteria.
- Provide ongoing, practice-based professional development, including peer learning networks and subject-linked workshops, to support educators in applying interdisciplinary, health promoting school approaches that also address environmental considerations.
- Distribute practical tools and resources, such as implementation guides, lesson templates, and case studies, to help schools translate health promoting school strategies into everyday teaching and operations that jointly address sustainability.



**Schools4Health** aims to make every school a health promoting school that prioritises the health of everyone in the school community. It strives to introduce, strengthen and sustain the adoption of a whole-of-school approach to health and wellbeing. It engages 16 schools across the EU with special consideration for school settings in deprived areas. To learn more about Schools4Health, go to [schools4health.eu](https://schools4health.eu).

Schools4Health brings together lessons learned that can support the adoption of health promoting schools approaches, as well as specific best practices in the areas of food, physical activity and mental health that contribute to the approach.

The Project is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA). Neither the European Union nor HaDEA can be held responsible for them. This policy brief was developed by [EuroHealthNet](https://eurohealthnet.eu) in collaboration with the Schools4Health Partnership.



## References

- 1 UNICEF (2024). The State of Children in the European Union.
- 2 European Parliament (2022). Future of Europe: Europeans see climate change as top challenge for the EU.
- 3 Pulimeno, M., Piscitelli, P., Colazzo, S., Colao, A., Miani, A. (2000) School as ideal setting to promote health and wellbeing among young people. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, 7;10(4):316-324.
- 4 Davis, J. M., Cooke, S.M. (2007) Educating for a healthy, sustainable world: an argument for integrating Health Promoting Schools and Sustainable Schools. *Health Promotion International*, 22 (4):346-353
- 5 OECD (2024). Reimagining Education, Realising Potential. International Summit on the Teaching Profession. OECD Publishing, Paris.
- 6 Bell, A. & Dymont, J. (2008). Grounds for health: The intersection of green school grounds and health-promoting schools. *Environmental Education Research*. 14:77-90.
- 7 UNESCO (2024). Green school quality standard: Greening every learning environment. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- 8 WHO (n.d.) Health Promoting Schools.
- 9 Dadaczynski, K., Jensen, B.B., Viig, N.G., Sormunen, M., von Seelen, J., Kuchma, V. and Vilaça, T. (2020), 'Health, well-being and education: Building a sustainable future. The Moscow statement on Health Promoting Schools'. *Health Education*,120(1):11-19.
- 10 INHERIT (2019) Education and Training.
- 11 Journals, Crdeep. (2024). Green Spaces: Nurturing School Children's Mental Health and Well-Being.
- 12 WHO & UNESCO (2021). Making every school a health-promoting school: global standards and indicators for health-promoting schools and systems. Geneva: World Health Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- 13 WHO & UNESCO (2021). Making every school a health-promoting school: implementation guidance. Geneva: World Health Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; 2021.
- 14 Davis, J. (2006). Research Review: Whole school approaches to sustainability: An international review of whole-school sustainability programs.
- 15 UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO & World Bank. (2000). FRESH Framework: Focusing Resources on Effective School Health.
- 16 UNESCO (n.d.) Education for sustainable development.
- 17 UNESCO. (2022). Green School Quality Standard: Transforming schools into climate-resilient learning environments. Paris: UNESCO.
- 18 UNESCO (2023). Greening Education Partnership: Getting every learner climate-ready. Paris: UNESCO.
- 19 European Council (2022). Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development. Official Journal of the European Union.
- 20 European Commission (2024). Working Group Schools: Learning for Sustainability.
- 21 Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U. and Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2022). GreenComp: The European sustainability competence framework. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- 22 European Commission (n.d.). Erasmus+ programme priorities.
- 23 European Commission (n.d.). Erasmus+.
- 24 European Commission (n.d.). Education for Climate.
- 25 European Union (n.d.). Learning Corner.
- 26 European Union (n.d.). Learning Corner – Learning materials.
- 27 European Commission (2024). Education and Training Monitor – Finland.
- 28 Fioramonti, F., Giordano, C., Basile, Basile, F. (2021) Fostering Academic Interdisciplinarity: Italy's Pioneering Experiment on Sustainability Education in Schools and Universities. *Frontiers in Sustainability*, Vol. 2.
- 29 Wellbeing Economy Alliance (n.d.). What is a Wellbeing Economy?
- 30 Gezonde School (2025). What is the Healthy School programme?
- 31 National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (2023). Strong interest among schools in incentive to promote healthy and sustainable eating.
- 32 Centre for Environmental Education and Sustainability. (n.d.) Who we are.
- 33 European Commission (2022) European Education Area Strategic Framework. Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability. Policy Brief 1 - Effective Policy Design in Learning for Sustainability.
- 34 Ministry of Agriculture in Hungary (n.d.). The Hungarian Green Kindergarten Network.
- 35 Green Kindergarten Network (n.d.). Green Kindergartens in Hungary.