

# #ECOFIGHTERS

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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*School students for the environment*

## Introduction of the project and its aim

With the *#EcoFighters – School students for the environment* project, OBESSU set to promote a culture of environmental awareness and activism in the context of school student and apprentices organisations, through democratic participation of young people in various ways, platforms and levels.

The project was supported by the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe, in the form of an Annual Work Plan with the following objectives:

- To promote the exchange of best practices and examples among OBESSU member organisations in relation to environmental issues and sustainability;
- To build capacities of school student activists in advocacy and democratic participation, with a special focus on addressing environmental challenges, from local and national to European and global levels;
- To develop an 'Action Kit' related to the topic for school student activists;
- To implement local and national awareness raising actions regarding environmental issues.

The project is implemented by the **Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions** (OBESSU), with the support of **Generation Climate Europe** (GCE).

Within this framework, OBESSU collected the perspective of school students and apprentices on the inclusion of Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES) in general secondary education and vocational education.

## Education for Environmental Sustainability at the EU and global level

At the EU level, the key role of education and training is emphasised in the European Green Deal, stressing the importance of engaging with learners, teachers, parents and the wider community on the environmental challenges faced in our society. The Communication on the European Education Area and the EU Biodiversity Strategy also highlighted the importance of education and training in supporting the shift towards a more sustainable and resource efficient society.

According to the preliminary findings of an ongoing research undertaken by PPMI for the European Commission, almost all EU Member States have adopted a vision of Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES) that links environmental challenges to social and economic issues. However, the content of policies mainstreaming education for environmental sustainability differ widely from one Member State to another, with huge disparities. There is a lack of common understanding of what policies mainstreaming education for environmental sustainability should entail. In the majority of cases, EES has been included in natural science courses. Recently, there is a willingness to include EES in social sciences courses and in a cross-disciplinary approach. However, teachers' education and training is lagging behind and in most EU member states, there is no national framework for assessment of EES, even when it is included in the curriculum.

To mitigate the effects of such discrepancies, the Commission is now proposing a Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability to support Member States in developing and implementing policies that promote and support environmental sustainability at all levels of education and training.

At the global level, UNESCO with the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework 2020-2030 aims at integrating EES into policies, learning environments, capacity- building of educators and local level action.

## OBESSU Recommendations

Based on the opinions of our Member organisations collected during the focus groups organised in the framework of the #EcoFighters - School students for the environment work plan, OBESSU developed the following recommendations addressed to national governments and regional and international institutions.

### A school curricula for the 21st century.

**School curricula shall reflect the current and future challenges faced by our societies.** School shall help learners fully understand the environmental and societal issues at stake, how they are interlinked with other global issues and empower them to become actors of change by providing them with the skills and competences they need to actively engage in society and contribute to finding sustainable solutions. Currently, our education system is merely at the service of the economy, equipping learners with the knowledge and skills they need to transition into the labour market. It is this paradigm that needs to be radically and sustainably changed. **We call on national and regional governments to start and promote a dialogue about the future of education, the values that we want to convey and the skills that need to be developed for the future, with teachers, parents, students themselves and the wider community. These consultations need to lead to a revision of school curricula.**

We call on the EU and other regional and international organisations to **support national governments in this exercise by creating synergies between countries engaged in a school curricula revision processes and provide spaces to exchange best practices.**

Any revision process needs to integrate **multiple cross-sectoral consultations** with a large variety of stakeholders such as educators, learners, parents and their unions, formal and non-formal education providers, civil society organisations including youth movements and environmental organisations in particular environmental youth groups (e.g. Fridays for Future groups) who have played a crucial role in raising societal awareness and pushing for political change. **National governments, regional and international institutions and formal education providers must recognise young people as valuable contributors and actors in all efforts to promote environmental sustainability.**

## Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES)

**The concept of EES and the knowledge and skills that it aims to develop such as “green skills” need to be further defined by national education systems.** The EU, the Council of Europe and the UN can play a crucial role by setting a common definition and pushing their Member States towards the same achievements while allowing sufficient flexibility in the implementation to meet their respective societal framework.

OBESSU believes that **EES** can not be incorporated into school curricula as a separate subject but shall rather be **integrated in a transversal and interdisciplinary approach, in the whole teaching programme, in the learning environment** (buildings, facilities management, governance, partnerships with the local communities, sustainable and safe transportation options for learners and staff, consumption of local and sustainable products, etc.) and **in teachers education and training**. Education for environmental sustainability shall aim at implementing a **whole-institution approach where sustainability is included in all the activities**.

**Lifelong learning** should be a fundamental component of the implementation of EES in formal education. EES should start from early childhood education and consistently continue through all educational levels until adult education.

**Project-based learning activities and peer learning activities, where students are the main actors of their learning, are educational practices that need to be further developed** by teachers and formal education providers. Additionally, formal education institutions can foster cooperation with the local community and involve learners in the co-creation of environmentally sustainable community-based projects that will benefit them and their communities.

Education programmes should **include activities in nature** to foster a bond with nature and support the promotion of sustainable habits in a more hands-on manner rather than a theoretical approach. The costs and challenges related to outdoor activities should not be in any case barriers to the implementation of outdoor educational activities. Regional development funds could be financial mechanisms used by schools to allocate budget for the reimbursement of costs related to outdoor activities incurred by schools. Educational activities must be free of charge for all learners and teachers.

In order to measure impact, a **framework for assessment** could be created as long as the governments further define **the knowledge and skills that education for environmental sustainability aims to develop**. When developing this framework, governments should be cautious about not adding an extra pressure and burden on teachers and learners. Additionally, the impact of completed projects within the local community, with or without the cooperation of local stakeholders should be taken into account when assessing environmental sustainability. Government should also further develop mechanisms for the **validation of non-formal and informal learning related to environmental sustainability**.

## Education funding

Despite the positive impact that education can have on the achievement of the SDGs, education remains an under-financed and under-prioritised sector. Ensuring consistent and adequate funding at European, national, regional and local level is of the utmost importance. Funds and programmes such as the EU Multiannual Financial Framework, the NextGenerationEU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, have the potential to support the implementation of EES and other necessary changes in education. The EU has the responsibility to set clear targets and a clear vision to its Member States.

## The role of non-formal education providers

Governments should **ensure political and financial support to youth organisations and other non-formal education providers** developing and implementing educational programmes on environmental sustainability as they can be effective allies. The competences developed in these programmes should be recognised and validated.

National governments should implement measures to **foster partnerships and collaborations between formal, non-formal and informal education providers**. The latter two can contribute by bringing innovative methodologies of teaching and learning.

Additionally, governments should **promote and support the access to extracurricular activities** provided by these organisations that contribute to empowering learners and promote community level actions for the environment.

## Inclusion

Educational and training programmes integrating education for environmental sustainability need to be **accessible and inclusive**. Governments need to take into consideration, at an early stage, the reality of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and make sure they find ways to include these groups.

Additionally, the global dimension of **EES should be addressed emphasising the inequalities when it comes to the environmental impacts on our lives and the actions that can be taken to mitigate this gap**.

## Teachers' education and training

**Teacher education** needs to be reviewed to empower and equip future teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are required for the green and digital transition. Additionally, national governments need to **develop continuous training programmes for teachers to upskill and reskill the existing workforce**. These trainings need to be supported by sustainable and adequate public funding to make them free and accessible to all teachers. In addition, they should be provided during teachers' working time.

Teachers need sufficient time, space and resources to be able to implement the 'hands-on' and transversal approach of EES within the teaching schedule.

National governments should also invest in **fostering exchanges of best practices among teachers and spaces for peer-to-peer learning**.

## Data and research

Research on educational methodologies has been particularly fruitful this last decade. When developing educational policies, national governments should **take into consideration the available data and find inspiration in the various quality research undertaken on innovative teaching methodologies and learner-centred pedagogies**. Additionally, educational policies should integrate regular evaluations and stakeholders feedback to guarantee to monitor their implementation and impact.

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The policy recommendations have been developed as part of the #EcoFighters - School students for the environment workplan, funded by the **European Youth Foundation** of the Council of Europe.

