



Policy Recommendations for Implementing Sustainability and Circular Economy Curriculum in High Schools

Deliverable D6.4
Policy recommendations



CircularCityChallenge



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INTRODUCTION

This policy recommendations assembly recognize that education policy is complex and requires balancing traditional top-down implementation processes with more bottom-up approaches that leave room for co-implementation and local adaptation. It suggests that to accomplish and enhance sustainability and circularity education change in schools, policy makers need to shape a coherent, actionable and well-communicated implementation strategy that engages stakeholders early on and takes into account the environment as part of the policy design process.

Recent research indicates that education policy is evolving within increasingly complex environments, shifting from top-down structures to more collaborative interactions among various stakeholders. This shift is particularly relevant for the implementation of sustainability and circularity education, as it involves extensive negotiation and engagement with teachers, school leaders, students, local and regional education policymakers, employers in the domains of sustainability and circularity, and higher education institutions. The implementation process itself can enhance

education systems by allowing stakeholders to participate from the outset in shaping policies, thereby ensuring greater impact when these policies reach schools.

These policy recommendations are based on the outcomes of our applied research project. Detailed methods and findings are accessible at circularcitychallengeproject.eu. Our research gathered insights through interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, including teachers, ministry representatives, sustainability experts, industry representatives who have implemented circularity principles, and both teachers and students. This data collection was held in Austria, Romania, and the Netherlands from April 2022 to April 2024.

By adopting these recommendations, we aim to create a more resilient and informed student body capable of addressing the sustainability challenges of the future.



KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND TARGET GROUPS FOR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is the list of key stakeholders involved in implementing sustainability curricula in high schools.

National Level Stakeholders:

- 1. Ministry of Education:** Responsible for setting educational standards and policies.
- 2. National Curriculum Development Agencies:** Develop and revise the national curriculum to include sustainability education.
- 3. Environmental Protection Agencies:** Provide expertise and resources on sustainability topics.
- 4. Teacher Training Institutes:** Train educators on how to effectively teach sustainability.
- 5. National Student Organizations:** Advocate for student interests and provide feedback on curriculum changes.
- 6. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** Offer support, resources, and programs related to sustainability education.
- 7. Educational Research Institutions:** Conduct research on best practices for sustainability education and provide data-driven recommendations.

Local Level Stakeholders:

- 1. Local Education Authorities:** Implement national policies at the local level and provide support to schools.
- 2. School Administrators and Principals:** Oversee the integration of sustainability curricula within their schools.
- 3. Teachers:** Deliver the sustainability curriculum and engage students in related activities.
- 4. Parents and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs):** Support and advocate for sustainability education within the community.
- 5. Local Environmental Organizations:** Partner with schools to provide local context and resources for sustainability education.
- 6. Community Leaders:** Promote and support sustainability initiatives within the local area.
- 7. Students:** Actively participate in sustainability education and provide feedback on its implementation.

These stakeholders play crucial roles in ensuring that sustainability education is effectively integrated into high school curricula, addressing both national standards and local needs.

However, these policy recommendations are specifically addressed to four groups with the actual power to influence sustainability curricula:

1. Ministry of Education:

- **Role:** Setting educational standards and policies at the national level.
- **Influence:** Can mandate the inclusion of sustainability education in the national curriculum.

2. National Curriculum Development Agencies:

- **Role:** Developing and revising the national curriculum.
- **Influence:** Can integrate sustainability and circularity principles into educational materials and guidelines.

3. Local Education Authorities:

- **Role:** Implementing national policies at the local level and providing support to schools.
- **Influence:** Can ensure that sustainability education is effectively adapted and applied in local contexts.

4. School Administrators and Principals:

- **Role:** Overseeing the integration of sustainability curricula within their schools.
- **Influence:** Can facilitate the practical implementation of sustainability education and support teachers in delivering it.

These groups are crucial in shaping and implementing a coherent, actionable, and well-communicated strategy for sustainability education, ensuring that it is effectively integrated into high school curricula and adapted to local needs.

GUIDING POLICIES: 10 KEY FINDINGS FOR INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

In this chapter, we present the 10 key findings from our research, which are designed to guide the development of policies for the effective integration of sustainability curricula into high schools.

1. High-School Guidance can be enhanced through University Student Tutorship

Based on insights from workshops with students and pupils, university students expressed strong support for providing high-school pupils with guidance throughout their educational journey. They also showed a keen interest in becoming tutors themselves. This valuable resource should be leveraged to enhance the support system for high-school pupils.

2. Engaging Real-Life Experts can significantly Motivate and Inspire Youth

Participants in focus groups highlighted the significance of connecting young people with real-life experts who can communicate in a teenager-friendly manner. These experts are role models and can help youths discover their interests, opinions, strengths, and potential future capabilities by asking the right questions. Additionally, having mentors for networking and practical leadership, as well as seeing their own ideas put into practice, were identified as key motivational factors.

“Workshops and excursions with externals are valuable for teachers and usually well received by students, by learning through experience and experimenting, like visits to laboratories.”

3. Integrate Sustainability Topics into the Existing Curriculum to Overcome Inequality in Student Opportunities for Education

Integrating sustainability challenges into existing school curricula is crucial for inclusivity. This approach ensures that students do not need to participate in an extracurricular manner, making the challenges more accessible to those with limited extracurricular support or other impediments, such as family responsibilities or difficult backgrounds.

4. Teachers' Capacity Challenges with Integrating New Content can be met with Regular Personnel Support

During the interviews with the teachers, concerns were raised about teachers' motivation and ability to engage in sustainability and circularity teaching beyond the existing curriculum. These concerns stem from a lack of time, the extensive mandatory content they must cover, and the challenges of fostering interdisciplinary cooperation among teachers.

5. Sustainability and circularity knowledge should be taught by breaking down complex topics into practical, local, and relatable issues for students.

To prevent students from feeling overwhelmed by the complex topics of sustainability and circular cities, these subjects should be broken down into small, practical, and simple issues. Focusing on local problems and solutions makes the topics more relatable and practical for students. Emphasis should be placed on connecting these issues to tangible „real-life“ problems in the students' daily lives, their own experiences, and their local environment, such as their school, municipality, or local industry. This approach helps students see the connection between global issues and their individual experiences by addressing questions like: „What is going on in the world?“, „What is your place in that world?“, and „How can you make that world a little bit more beautiful through your actions?“

An effective method mentioned by experts is the „principle adaptation approach,“ which involves providing students with basic principles of circularity, such as those of the circular economy, without delving into technical details. Instead, practical examples (e.g., from the construction sector) illustrate how these principles can be applied. This method encourages students to think within these principles and adapt them

to their own fields of interest, nudging them to explore existing solutions and find the right sources of information for their investigations.

6. For EDS implementation, it is crucial to Bridge Teachers' Knowledge Gaps in Sustainability and Circular Economy"

The interviews highlighted the importance of addressing knowledge gaps not only among students but also among teachers. It is not always evident that teachers possess a basic understanding of key concepts such as „sustainability“ and „circular economy.“ While teachers do not need to become experts in these fields, they require sufficient knowledge to raise awareness and sensitize students, preparing them for their future careers. An expert from Austria noted that in rural schools, teachers with an interest or awareness in sustainability are particularly rare. Therefore, sensitizing teachers and adapting their education—both initial and ongoing training—is as crucial as updating the students' curriculum.

“After all, even with circularity becoming part of the official curriculum, if teachers do not take these contents seriously themselves, they will not be able to teach them sufficiently and meaningfully. Overall, even with trainings, more needs to be done, to make sure that this knowledge is actually applied in teaching.”

7. There is a need to enhance familiarity with and implementation of project-based methodologies in schools.

There is a growing awareness among teachers about project-based (inquiry-based) methodologies. However, not all school formats support these methods, and familiarity among teachers and students varies. While workshop formats are becoming more recognized, their practice remains limited. These insights suggest an increasing interest in these educational tools, but the capability to effectively implement them is often lacking.

8. Cross subject collaboration is crucial to effectively teach sustainability and circularity

Educational experts highlighted the potential and necessity of incorporating circularity into various school subjects, including its application to the CircularCityChallenge. Collaboration among teachers from different subjects would be a valuable approach. However, the feasibility of such collaboration largely depends on the school's structure and existing cooperation habits, with many schools formally prohibiting cross-subject teacher collaboration.

„One approach is to anchor the materials more directly with official curricula by specifying exactly which parts of the curriculum, across different subjects, are covered by the project. The more subjects and curriculum parts that can be ‚ticked off,‘ the more appealing it might be for teachers. It's important to note that school curricula vary not only between countries but also across different school types. Additionally, the best possible integration into school activities should be pursued. Various possibilities, which might be more applicable in some countries than others, include: Project work as a substitution for homework, Integration into ‚project weeks,‘ which usually have clear pedagogical goals and enable cross-subject activities, Integration into science fairs, After-school care (‚Hort‘), often run by the municipality or special ‚Hort‘ associations in Austria, or existing school clubs (environmental club, debate club, etc.)“

9. Addressing regional disparities in high schools requires tailored approaches

Significant disparities exist among high schools within the same city and between urban and rural areas, particularly in terms of entry requirements (e.g., student grades). This highlights the diversity of school systems, indicating that each type of school requires tailored approaches.

10. It is crucial to Integrate Media Literacy and Anxiety Management into Sustainability Education

When raising awareness about contemporary sustainability challenges, particularly climate issues, it is crucial to avoid increasing anxiety among young students, who are already exposed to distressing news about their future. Emphasizing the positive impact, they can have is essential. Therefore, equipping students with the skills to manage anxiety and crisis-related news should be considered a vital component of sustainability education.

"Balance between conveying the sincerity of existing problems but creating positive encouragement and impact at the same time, needs to be found."



Policy Recommendations

In this chapter, we outline a series of policy recommendations designed to effectively integrate sustainability curricula into high schools. These policies have been carefully crafted to meet the needs of all involved stakeholders, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to sustainability education. They are specifically addressed to the four key stakeholders listed above: the Ministry of Education, National Curriculum Development Agencies, Local Education Authorities, and School Administrators and Principals.

1. INTEGRATE SUSTAINABILITY AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY EDUCATION INTO NATIONAL CURRICULA

Mandate the inclusion of sustainable development and circular economy principles in the national education curriculum across all subjects. This approach ensures that all students, regardless of their extracurricular support or personal circumstances, have equal access to learning about sustainability within their regular school projects. By embedding these topics into the standard curriculum, we can make education more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

Integrating sustainability challenges into existing school curricula is crucial for inclusivity. This approach ensures that students do not need to participate in an extracurricular manner, making the challenges more accessible to those with limited extracurricular support or other impediments, such as family responsibilities or difficult backgrounds.

1. Curriculum Integration

Embed sustainability topics into core subjects such as science, geography, and social studies. Develop lesson plans that incorporate sustainability concepts relevant to each subject.

Outcome: Ensures all students receive education on sustainability within their regular coursework, promoting inclusivity.

2. Project-Based Learning

Design project-based learning activities that focus on sustainability challenges. These projects should be part of the standard curriculum and assessed as part of students' grades.

Outcome: Provides hands-on learning experiences that engage students in real-world sustainability issues without requiring extracurricular participation.

3. Teacher Training and Resources

Provide professional development for teachers on how to integrate sustainability into their teaching. Supply resources such as lesson plans, project ideas, and access to sustainability experts.

Outcome: Equips teachers with the knowledge and tools to effectively teach sustainability topics within the existing curriculum.

4. Collaborative Projects

Encourage collaborative projects that involve multiple subjects and grade levels. For example, a school-wide recycling program that includes elements of science, math, and social studies.

Outcome: Fosters a holistic understanding of sustainability and encourages teamwork and cross-disciplinary learning.

5. Assessment and Feedback

Develop assessment criteria that include sustainability competencies. Provide regular feedback to students on their understanding and application of sustainability concepts.

Outcome: Ensures that sustainability education is taken seriously and that students are evaluated on their knowledge and skills in this area.

6. Regular Review and Improvement

Establish a process for regularly reviewing and updating the sustainability curriculum. Gather feedback from students, teachers, and community members to continuously improve the program.

Outcome: Keeps the curriculum relevant and effective, ensuring that it meets the needs of all students and adapts to new sustainability challenges.

7. Allocate Specific Funding for ESD Initiatives

Designate dedicated funding for schools to support the implementation of ESD initiatives. This funding should cover:

- Resources for project-based learning activities focused on sustainability.
- Development and execution of sustainability projects within the school and community.

- Creation and distribution of educational materials related to sustainable development.

Outcome: Provides schools with the financial support needed to integrate sustainability into their curriculum, fostering a comprehensive and practical understanding of sustainable development among students.

8. Implement curricula that emphasizes students' agency

Implement project-based learning that emphasizes students' potential positive impact on sustainability issues. Integrate media literacy and anxiety management into existing subjects, such as social studies, science, and health education. These action aims to create a balanced and supportive educational environment where students can learn about sustainability without being overwhelmed by anxiety.

Outcome: Students feel empowered and motivated by seeing the tangible results of their efforts, fostering a sense of agency and hope.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can create an inclusive and comprehensive approach to sustainability education, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to learn about and engage with important environmental issues.

2. ADDRESS REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN HIGH SCHOOLS

1. Standardized Curriculum Criteria with Local Adjustments:

Implement a baseline standard for entry requirements across all high schools, with flexibility for local adjustments to account for regional differences.

Outcome: Consistent entry criteria with flexibility for local adjustments to address regional differences.

2. Resource Allocation Based on Need:

Allocate additional resources (funding, teachers, facilities) to schools in rural or underprivileged urban areas to level the playing field.

Outcome: Enhanced educational resources in underserved regions, leading to more equitable opportunities.

3. Regional Education Councils:

Establish councils that include representatives from urban and rural schools to ensure policies are tailored to the specific needs of each region.

Outcome: Policies tailored to the specific needs of each region, ensuring more effective educational strategies.

4. Teacher Training Programs:

Develop specialized training programs for teachers to address the unique challenges faced by students in different regions.

Outcome: Teachers equipped to address the unique challenges faced by students in different regions.

5. Enhanced Student Support Services:

Provide targeted support services such as tutoring, counseling, and career guidance, particularly in schools with higher entry requirements.

Outcome: Improved student performance and well-being,

6. Community and Parental Engagement:

Foster stronger community and parental involvement in schools to better understand and address local educational needs.

Outcome: Better understanding and addressing of local educational needs through active community participation.

7. Flexible Curriculum Design:

Allow schools to adapt the curriculum to better suit the local context, ensuring it is relevant and engaging for students from diverse backgrounds.

Outcome: Relevant and engaging curriculum for students from diverse backgrounds, enhancing learning outcomes.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation:

Regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these policies, making adjustments as needed to ensure they are meeting the intended goals.

Outcome: Continuous improvement of educational policies to ensure they meet the intended goals.

These policies aim to create a more equitable education system by recognizing and addressing the unique needs of different regions and school types.



3. ESTABLISH TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS

Develop and fund comprehensive teacher training programs focused on ESD and circularity. This equips educators with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively teach these concepts and integrate them into their lessons.

1. Hire Dedicated Sustainability Coordinators

Employ dedicated sustainability coordinators in schools to assist teachers with planning and implementing sustainability and circularity topics.

Outcome: Reduces the additional workload on teachers and ensures consistent integration of new content.

2. Provide Teaching Assistants for Sustainability Projects

Assign teaching assistants specifically for sustainability projects to help with lesson preparation, classroom activities, and project management.

Outcome: Eases the burden on teachers, allowing them to focus on delivering quality education without being overwhelmed.

3. Create Interdisciplinary Teaching Teams

Form interdisciplinary teams of teachers who can collaborate on integrating sustainability topics across different subjects. Provide time within the school schedule for these teams to plan and coordinate.

Outcome: Facilitates interdisciplinary cooperation and ensures a cohesive approach to sustainability education.

4. Develop Resource Sharing Platforms

Establish online platforms where teachers can share lesson plans, resources, and best practices related to sustainability and circularity education.

Outcome: Saves time and effort by providing ready-to-use materials and fostering a collaborative teaching community.

5. Incorporate Sustainability Goals into School Plans

Integrate sustainability goals into the school's overall strategic plan, ensuring that sustainability education is a priority and receives the necessary support and resources.

Outcome: Aligns sustainability initiatives with the school's mission and provides a clear framework for implementation.

6. Offer Incentives for Participation

Provide incentives such as recognition, awards, or additional professional development credits for teachers who actively engage in sustainability and circularity teaching.

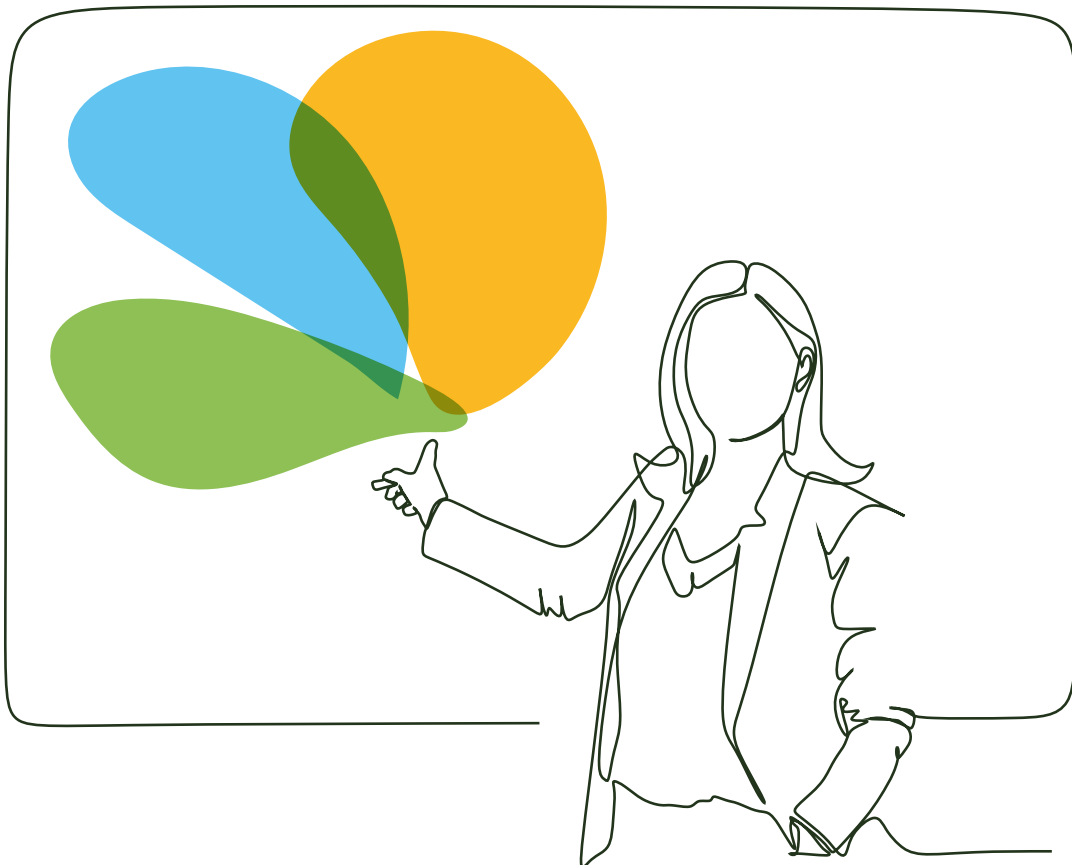
Outcome: Motivates teachers to participate and rewards their efforts in integrating new content.

7. Regular Feedback and Support Mechanisms

Establish regular feedback and support mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, to understand teachers' needs and challenges. Provide ongoing support based on this feedback.

Outcome: Ensures that teachers feel supported and their concerns are addressed promptly, fostering a positive teaching environment.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can effectively support teachers in integrating sustainability and circularity topics into the existing curriculum, overcoming capacity challenges and enhancing the overall quality of education.



4. ENHANCE CROSS-SUBJECT COLLABORATION TO TEACH SUSTAINABILITY AND CIRCULARITY

1. Institutional Support and Policy Changes

Revise School Policies: Amend school policies to formally allow and encourage cross-subject collaboration among teachers.

Administrative Support: Ensure school administrators actively support and facilitate interdisciplinary projects.

2. Professional Development:

Training Programs: Implement professional development programs focused on interdisciplinary teaching methods and the integration of sustainability and circularity concepts.

Workshops and Seminars: Organize regular workshops and seminars to share best practices and successful case studies of cross-subject collaboration.

3. Curriculum Integration:

Unified Curriculum Design: Develop a unified curriculum that incorporates sustainability and circularity across various subjects, ensuring coherence and relevance.

Project-Based Learning: Promote project-based learning initiatives that require input from multiple disciplines, fostering a holistic understanding of sustainability.

4. Collaboration Platforms:

Digital Collaboration Tools: Provide digital platforms and tools that facilitate communication and collaboration among teachers from different subjects.

Interdisciplinary Teams: Form interdisciplinary teams of teachers to plan and execute integrated lessons and projects.

5. Resource Allocation:

Funding and Resources: Allocate specific funding and resources to support cross-subject projects and initiatives.

Time Allocation: Adjust timetables to allow for joint planning sessions and collaborative teaching periods.

5. ESTABLISH PARTNERSHIPS WITH INDUSTRY

Foster collaboration between local educational institutions and the community to support sustainability projects, leveraging the motivational impact of real-life experts and mentors.

Engaging real-life experts can significantly motivate and inspire youth. Focus group participants highlighted the importance of connecting young people with experts who can communicate in a teenager-friendly manner. These experts serve as role models, helping youths discover their interests, opinions, strengths, and potential future capabilities by asking the right questions. Additionally, mentors for networking and practical leadership, as well as opportunities for students to see their ideas put into practice, were identified as key motivational factors.

1. Establish Partnerships with Local Experts and Organizations

Create a database of local experts in various fields of sustainability (e.g., environmental scientists, urban gardeners, recycling coordinators) who are willing to engage with students.

Outcome: Students gain access to role models and mentors who can provide real-world insights and inspiration

2. Organize Regular Workshops and Seminars

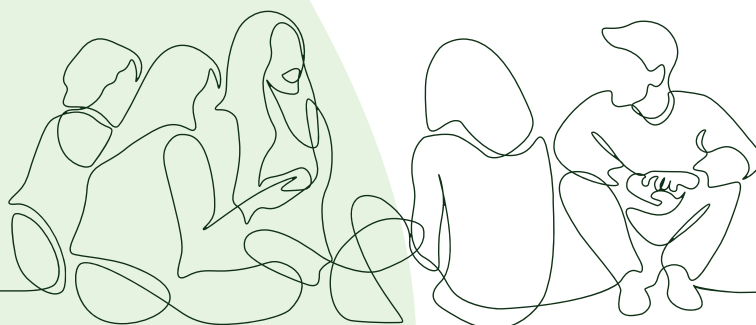
Schedule regular workshops and seminars led by real-life experts who can discuss sustainability topics in an engaging and relatable manner.

Outcome: Students are exposed to diverse perspectives and practical knowledge, fostering a deeper interest in sustainability.

3. Mentorship Programs

Establish mentorship programs where students are paired with local experts and professionals who can guide them through sustainability projects and career planning.

Outcome: Students receive personalized guidance and support, helping them to develop leadership skills and practical experience.



6. ENSURE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Foster collaboration between schools and local communities to support sustainability projects. Examples include community gardens, recycling programs, and local clean-up initiatives, which help students apply their learning in real-world contexts.

To prevent students from feeling overwhelmed by the complex topics of sustainability and circular cities, break these subjects down into small, practical, and simple issues. Focus on local problems and solutions to make the topics more relatable and practical. Emphasize tangible „real-life“ problems connected to students’ daily lives, experiences, and local environments, such as their school, municipality, or local industry. This approach helps students see the connection between global issues and their individual experiences

1. Local Problem-Solving Projects

Integrate project-based learning that focuses on local environmental issues, such as waste management in the school or community, local water conservation efforts, or urban gardening projects.

Outcome: Students engage with real-world problems in their immediate environment, making the learning experience more relevant and impactful.

2. Community Partnerships

Establish partnerships with local businesses, municipalities, and organizations to provide practical examples and case studies of sustainability and circularity in action.

Outcome: Students gain insights into how sustainability principles are applied in their community, enhancing their understanding and motivation.

3. Integrate Community Projects into the Curriculum

Develop curriculum modules that incorporate community-based sustainability projects such as community gardens, recycling programs, and local clean-up initiatives.

Outcome: Students apply their learning in real-world contexts, enhancing their understanding and commitment to sustainability.

4. Student-Led Initiatives

Support and fund student-led sustainability initiatives and clubs. These initiatives encourage students to take leadership roles in promoting environmental stewardship and circular practices within their schools

Outcome: Students experience the impact of their efforts firsthand, boosting their confidence and motivation.

5. Community Involvement in School Events

Invite community members to participate in school events focused on sustainability, such as science fairs, project exhibitions, and environmental awareness days.

Outcome: Strengthens the bond between schools and the community, creating a collaborative environment for sustainability education.

6. Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Regularly collect feedback from students, teachers, and community members to assess the effectiveness of the programs and make necessary adjustments.

Outcome: Ensures that the initiatives remain relevant and impactful, continuously improving the quality of sustainability education.

7. Interactive Workshops and Field Trips

Organize workshops and field trips that allow students to see sustainability practices firsthand, such as visits to recycling plants, sustainable farms, or green buildings.

Outcome: Provides experiential learning opportunities that make abstract concepts tangible and memorable.

8. Regular Reflection and Discussion

Incorporate regular reflection and discussion sessions where students can connect global sustainability issues to their personal experiences and local environment.

Outcome: Helps students internalize the relevance of sustainability in their lives and encourages them to think critically about their role in addressing these issues.

By implementing these recommendations, local educational institutions can create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that not only educates students about sustainability but also empowers them to take active roles in their communities.



7. ESTABLISH PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL UNIVERSITIES

Foster Collaboration between University Students and High Schools for Sustainability Projects

To enhance sustainability education and initiatives in high schools by leveraging the mentorship and guidance of university students.

Workshops have demonstrated that university students are enthusiastic about mentoring high school pupils, which leads to effective knowledge transmission and increased motivation among high school students. This mentorship can be particularly impactful in the context of sustainability projects, where practical guidance and inspiration are crucial.

Recommendations:

- 1. Establish Mentorship Programs:** Create structured mentorship programs where university students can volunteer to guide high school pupils on sustainability projects. This can include regular meetings, workshops, and collaborative projects.
- 2. Integrate into Curriculum:** Encourage high schools to integrate these mentorship opportunities into their curriculum, allowing students to earn credits or recognition for their participation in sustainability initiatives.
- 3. Provide Training and Resources:** Offer training sessions for university students to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively mentor high school pupils. Provide resources and materials to support both mentors and mentees.
- 4. Facilitate Collaboration:** Set up platforms or forums where university students and high school pupils can easily connect, share ideas, and collaborate on sustainability projects. This could be through online portals, social media groups, or regular in-person meetings.
- 5. Monitor and Evaluate:** Implement a system to monitor the progress and impact of these mentorship programs. Collect feedback from both university students and high school pupils to continuously improve the initiative.
- 6. Promote Success Stories:** Highlight and promote successful collaborations and projects to inspire more students to participate and to showcase the benefits of such programs to the wider community.

By fostering collaboration between university students and high schools, we can create a supportive environment that not only enhances sustainability education but also build strong, motivated, and knowledgeable future leaders.



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**Creating a Next Generation Participatory
Contest for Young People to integrate
Circularity in School Curricula**