



## ENCOURAGING AND SUPPORTING EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

The United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) was launched under UNESCO in 2005. Countries around the world have embraced it. In the United States, the US Partnership on Education for Sustainable Development (USPESD) has taken a lead role in coordinating many activities for the Decade (see: [www.uspartnership.org](http://www.uspartnership.org)). The primary goal of the Decade, as agreed to by UN Member States, is to: “encourage governments to include measures to implement the Decade in their respective education systems and national development plans.”

The Working Group for Sustainable Change and the USPESD<sup>1</sup> urge the Obama Administration and the US Department of Education to participate fully in this international effort and to implement Education for Sustainability (also referred to as Education for Sustainable Development) throughout America's schools.<sup>2</sup>

Sustainable development provides an integrated approach to living and problem solving that recognizes the interconnection of and leads to social equity, environmental health, and economic prosperity. It requires us to consider how our actions impact both current and future generations, along with our local and the world community. It demands that we recognize and work within the biophysical limits of the earth's natural systems. Today we understand that these three interconnected elements of sustainability operate on a global scale and that effective citizenship involves thinking and decision making on a planetary scale as well.

The international community has recognized that education is the key to sustainable development and thus is now focusing on Education for Sustainability. Our PK-12 schools need to help children become sustainability literate world citizens so they can enact the principles and values associated with the broader vision of sustainability. Our nation's educators have the opportunity to model sustainable practices and guide and empower students to create a sustainable future; yet few educators in the United States are trained to do so. Our children need teachers that are sustainability literate, and we must provide the opportunities for them to become so.

Education for Sustainability provides students with opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, values, and responsible citizenship behaviors related to living more sustainable lives and creating a more sustainable global society. There is a strong emphasis on finding better ways of thinking and problem solving, specifically using systems thinking with a long-term perspective. Education for Sustainability provides a context for integrated curriculum in core subject areas including reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, along with professional and occupational studies, community service, social justice, personal responsibility, and the arts.

It addresses the interconnected nature of critical issues as poverty, climate change, agriculture, the environment, sustainable production, consumption of goods and services, population, conflict, health, and quality of life. The ultimate goal is to educate citizens who will live responsibly and work to build a more sustainable world<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uspartnership.org>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.desd.org>

<sup>3</sup> McMillan & Higgs, *Implementing Sustainability Education Lessons from Four Innovative Schools*, U Michigan, 2003



Education for Sustainability promotes:

- Green pathways to prosperity through development of a sustainability literate workforce
- Interdisciplinary learning rather than single subject “silo”-based learning
- Project-based assessment rather than traditional standardized testing
- Multi-method approaches to learning incorporating the use of technology, the arts, place based learning, debate, and simulations
- Participatory decision-making
- Locally relevant, as well as a national and international, focus

Recognizing that humanity is facing unprecedented challenges today and that the US education system has many of its own, Education for Sustainability provides a unique and exciting opportunity to re-engage youth in their education and in the complex problem solving necessary to address these challenges. Furthermore, the new "green" economy requires a work force that is well prepared to fill these job opportunities and participate fully in a new economy. Education for Sustainability is a framework that promotes academic achievement and engages students in solving real-world problems through the use of integrated curriculum, instruction, and modeling of sustainable institutional practices.

The Obama administration has called for the United States to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>4</sup> Among these, Goal 7 is to, “Ensure Environmental Sustainability particularly by integrating the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; and to reverse the loss of environmental resources; reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water; and achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.”

In order to achieve these worthy Goals, it is crucially important that the concepts of Education for Sustainable Development be fully integrated into the PK-12 curriculum and the professional development of teachers.

All of the UN Member States agreed to develop and implement National Strategies for Sustainability, first during the Rio Earth Summit Conference in 1992 and then again during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. We urge the Education Transition Team to recommend that the Obama Administration implement the recommendations made by the President’s Council on Sustainable Development<sup>5</sup> during the Clinton Administration and fulfill our country’s commitment to develop and implement such a National Strategy Plan. The principles of sustainable development should then be integrated into our country’s programs and policies and Education for Sustainability incorporated as a part of this plan.

In addition the Department of Education should ensure that students and schools throughout the U.S. learn about and are engaged in the process of developing and implementing the National

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals> and <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/envIRON.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> The President’s Council issued two reports on Education for Sustainability, along with many other topic areas. The reports should thus be used and referred to in educating for, and studying, sustainable development. See: <http://clinton5.nara.gov/PCSD>.



Strategy Plan. Sustainability should be incorporated in all aspects of our educational institutions, including in the curriculum, through the use of educational experiences in the natural environment, involvement in the local and global community, and utilizing sustainability principles in both the activities and functioning of the school and the school facilities themselves.

We urge the Transition Team to recommend that such a plan should include:

- Provisions and legislation for appointing a national Education for Sustainability Director in the Department of Education
- Funding for teacher professional development in Education for Sustainability, curriculum modules and frameworks
- Development and dissemination of sustainability curriculum materials
- Establishment of a committee of educators to guide the department in incorporating Education for Sustainability in the schools

The plan should lead to the adoption of a common framework for Standards and Guidelines. The K-12 and Teacher Education sector of the USPESD has developed a set of Education for Sustainability Standards which can be downloaded and considered for this purpose at: [http://www.uspartnership.org/main/show\\_passage/48](http://www.uspartnership.org/main/show_passage/48). The goal should be to ensure that every school in America has the resources and capabilities needed to integrate Education for Sustainability as a primary component within the curriculum.

During a major speech on education that President-elect Obama made on September 9 in Dayton, Ohio he said, “The decisions our leaders make about education in the coming years will shape our future for generations to come. We need a new vision for a 21st century education – one in which we aren’t just supporting existing schools, but are spurring innovation... other countries are outperforming us because they’re spending less time teaching things that don’t matter and more time teaching things that do.”

Education for Sustainability is needed as we prepare for the changes that we are likely to face in the coming years. Many efforts have already been initiated in various places around the country to advance this. Let’s hope that our school systems, educators, and citizenry will be up to the task.

## LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

We support the recommendations on education that were made in the Transition to Green Report, issued by 29 environmental and conservation organizations. Unfortunately, however, these organizations did not address, nor perhaps even consider the need to include a specific focus on, Education for Sustainability – which is why our recommendations are also needed.

Along with the new positions in the Administration that they suggest, we urge the Education Transition Team to recommend that an **Advisor on Environmental Education and Sustainability** be included in the Council on Environmental Quality and an **Education for Sustainability Director** be included in the Department of Education.



In addition, we urge the Department of Education Transition Team to recommend that action be taken to support the following legislation:

- Fully appropriate the funds needed to implement the Higher Education Sustainability Act, which passed Congress as a part of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HR 4137) on August 1, 2008. HR 4137 creates a pioneering "University Sustainability Grants Program" at the Department of Education, thus offering competitive grants to institutions and associations of higher education to develop, implement and evaluate sustainability curricula, practices, and academic programs. Call for the full authorization of \$50 million.<sup>6</sup>
- Support HR 7063, the "US and World Education" Act to increase funding for International Education. Ten year old Ethan Matsuda says of the Act on his website<sup>7</sup>, "My parents' generation has left us with a big mess. Global warming, industrial pollution, famine, drought, war, and child labor are just a few of the problems we will have to tackle. We cannot wait for them to act. We kids need to do something about this right now. We need to demand that our schools teach us about these big issues that we will have to solve. It's time to take matters in our own hands and pass this law."
- Seek passage of the No Child Left Inside Act to create \$100 million in funding for state environmental and **also sustainability** literacy plans, teacher education, and increased access to quality environmental **and sustainability** education experiences for all young people.
- Support reauthorization of the National Environmental Education Act (NEEA), which was passed in 1990 and provides the primary support for environmental education.
- Support the National 21st Century High-Performing Public School Facilities Act, H.R. 3021, which passed the House by a vote of 250 to 164. The bill would create new funding administered by the Department of Education to help public school systems reduce energy costs and carbon emissions through green building design while funding essential and long overdue repairs and upgrades. The legislation should be modified to **promote Education for Sustainability, and to engage students** in focusing on the relationships between a healthy environment and healthy communities, and improve and enhance schoolyard environments to create greener and healthier schools for students of all ages.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fundee.org/campaigns/usp>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.usandtheworld.org> and <http://web.pacific.edu/x26154.xml>