


Promises Practices for Education for Sustainability

Through our work with educators, programs, and schools, ten promising practices have emerged as the most effective strategies in making Education for Sustainability a meaningful part of curriculum and programs.

PROMISING PRACTICE 1

Sustainability is a lens.

Sustainability is a lens through which educators, administrators, and students examine real-world questions on any topic, in any discipline. This lens looks for the connections between environmental integrity, social equity, and economic prosperity. By framing essential questions around the Big Ideas of Sustainability and connecting students to community, we can help them better understand the real interdependence and interconnections of our world. Sustainability can tie together an entire unit or program, a school year, or the K–12 experience into a cohesive curriculum. It provides a larger reason to be doing service-learning.


 *EXAMPLE: A 4/5th grade team of teachers develop a Land and Community unit integrating language arts, science and social studies. The teachers adapt two district science kits on soils and geology, and set the context for the exploration in a local community gardening center. In language arts student read fictional narratives about community gardening, as well as informational texts about the local gardening center from a series in the local newspaper. The unit comes together in a student-directed service-learning project that addresses food justice in their community.*

PROMISING PRACTICE 2

Students gain an understanding of the Big Ideas of Sustainability.

From this integrative perspective, we also can recognize and build on the specific concepts and skills of sustainability. These include what are often referred


to as the Big Ideas of Sustainability (see p. 3), as well as academic standards important to many schools' curricula. As they learn to apply the *Big Ideas* on a local level, through a hands-on curriculum, students become able to solve the complex problems of the future.

 *EXAMPLE: Students develop their understanding of diversity by studying a local waterway and a neighborhood. They find comparisons between the two "communities" and understand the need for diversity in both human and natural communities for survival.*

PROMISING PRACTICE 3

Students actively think about creating a sustainable future.


The concept of sustainability is inherently forward thinking. It leads all of us—and especially young people—to not just understand issues, but to inquire about and act towards creating a healthy future for all. Many communities working on sustainable development include a public priority-setting component to these efforts, in an attempt to move away from top-down decision-making. It's important to include all voices in this process, including students. Incorporating visioning into our curriculum can help students develop problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills, especially when the future-thinking is about real communities and issues, not just simulations or futuristic creations.

 *EXAMPLE: Students create drawings and models of ideal neighborhoods, look for the gaps between the current status and future vision, and then present recommendations to city council for neighborhood improvements.*

PROMISING PRACTICE 4

Past, present and future contexts and impacts are connected.


Frequently students see the past as just that—something that happened before their lifetime, with no significance or relevance to the present or the future. However, understanding the past provides clues to how we arrived at our current situation. It also suggests how we may maintain or alter our actions, decision-making processes, beliefs, and theories to create our vision for the future.

 *EXAMPLE: Students and families learn from community members about their city's history and how the messages in these events or stories relate to current issues impacting their neighborhood's quality of life.*

PROMISING PRACTICE 5

Students consider impacts of personal and community decisions.

As students build an understanding of the Big Ideas of Sustainability, they begin to consider their role in affecting change and making decisions for the community's, the planet's, and their own personal quality of life. A unit or program that includes this promising practice will not only outline information about an issue, but also offer students the chance to be part of assessing and deciding on a response to the issue.


 *EXAMPLE: Students do a "waste audit" of their school or community, studying how individual and collective actions can either help or hinder the local ecosystem.*

PROMISING PRACTICE 6

Local and global perspectives, contexts, and needs are considered.

Investigating the local community from all angles is a fundamental element of Education for Sustainability. It is crucial that students be connected with their local natural and human communities to develop their understanding of cycles, diversity, and relationships.


This prepares them to understand the interdependence of systems, and to take an active role in service. As their worldview expands, students use global issues for comparison and communication, but their local community remains the context for learning that is most accessible and immediate.

 *EXAMPLE: Teachers design a year-long theme focusing on cycles to build students' understanding of agricultural and natural systems and culture. Through video conferencing, students work with educators to learn about agricultural practices in Central America, and design collaborative project with students in Ecuador. Literacy connections are incorporated through related readings from local folktales, historical pieces, and storytelling. Science and math skills are applied in studying the local habitat.*

PROMISING PRACTICE 7

Academic learning is connected to a real issue or situation.

When students apply their learning to issues that are relevant and meaningful to their daily lives, education comes to life. It is no longer confined to a textbook or school walls. Action in response to an issue can take many forms. It can be physical or kinesthetic (habitat study, river bank clean up, historic preservation work, etc.); or it can be analytical (creating a public service announcement for a local fundraiser, writing letters to governmental representatives, or meeting with local officials). Through EFS, students have the opportunity to actually address issues with the goal of creating more vibrant, just, safe and healthy communities.


 *EXAMPLE: Students host a Community Forum at City Hall where they invite local and state government representatives to respond to questions they have developed. The questions, generated by the students, are related to their study of community health and well-being. The students take the role of event conveners and orga-*

nizers, interviewers, reporters, and videographers during the forum. In the weeks that follow the students work to share the results of the forum with the local community through a newspaper article, a blog with photos, and a YouTube video. Students facilitate community response and dialogue through the blog and video posting.

PROMISING PRACTICE 8

Students practice inquiry and an open-ended questioning process.

Inquiry-based learning involves more than merely asking simplistic questions. It requires the learner or learning community to apply critical thinking skills, find and process information, and utilize that knowledge in actual situations. This process can help to build a foundation for life-long learning.

 *EXAMPLE: A elementary grade unit uses sustainability to meet three different goals: local requirements to teach topics in Earth Science; state requirements to create standards-based units; and an educator's interests in encouraging students to think and care more about their school community. Students apply these goals to their overarching question of, "How can we care for, protect, and improve our community?"*

PROMISING PRACTICE 9

Students participate in problem solving, community building, and service-learning.

Helping students see the real-world connections between their education and their community enriches their learning in several ways. It increases students' awareness of how their community contributes to social, economic, and environmental sustainability through its decisions and practices. It also creates meaningful opportunities for students to contribute to their community. Through service-learning, students develop as active citizens, learn problem-solving skills, and experience a sense of social responsibility and personal efficacy by engaging in thoughtful action to help their communities.



EXAMPLE: Students realize that many buildings in their community are still not handicapped accessible. They research the issue, develop a plan to install ramps, propose it to local government who then pass a resolution to build it. Students participate in crafting a PR plan that included fundraising to offset costs.

PROMISING PRACTICE 10

A program or curriculum demonstrates interdependence of economic, environmental, and social systems.

When an educational curriculum or program demonstrates the interdependence of the economy, environment, and society, it is reaching into the depths of sustainability. Using an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum to show how individual systems are interwoven helps students study, experience, and understand the connections between all of the elements of their own lives. This in turn encourages them to expand that knowledge to the workings of their community, helping them become thoughtful and engaged citizens in the process.



EXAMPLE: Students are involved in helping their school use the lens of sustainability for all of its operations, curriculum, and decision-making. The institution actively uses sustainability thinking, integrating it into everything, from parent engagement to wages for food service employees to choosing cleaning products and classroom materials.