A framework for developing whole-school approaches to education for sustainability

Teacher guide

What is a "whole-school"approach to education for sustainability (EfS)? Is there more than one kind of whole-school approach? Does our school have a whole-school approach at the moment? How would it work if we did? How would we implement it? Today, teachers at all levels of schooling are more frequently asking these questions. This teacher guide accompanies a **framework** for developing whole-school approaches to EfS which, hopefully, will help you to answer some of these questions. The framework, which can be used by any New Zealand school, is not a questionnaire; rather it is a means of setting up discussions within a school and for scaffolding the school's future actions towards sustainability. These discussions, the outcomes of which are always formative, and never summative, will be led by your facilitator.

The framework's three purposes

What do people mean when they ask, "Are you taking a *whole-school* approach to education for sustainability (or to environmental education)?" The first of the three purposes for the framework is therefore:

> 1) Clarifying *what is meant* by the term "whole school approaches" to EfS.

The framework proposes 25 **aspects** of whole-school approaches which schools might need to take into account; for example, "working collaboratively". The framework divides these aspects into four **sections:** people (ten aspects), programmes (six), practices (six) and place (three). Each aspect has five **indicators** which fall under a set of five headings, namely, "absent", "preparatory", "emerging", "developing", and "well developed". The indicators are seen to build upon another from left to right. The framework therefore has a total of 125 indicators. This means that the question 'are you taking a whole-school approach to EfS?' does not set up a simple "yes"/"no" situation. Rather, every school will have its unique pattern of responses to that question.

We are now ready to think about the second major purpose of the framework:

> 2) Helping a school to identify what might be involved if it were to *initiate* a whole school approach to EfS.

The framework is an in-house brainstorming and discussion document, suitable for department, syndicate and whole-staff meetings where, for a given aspect of the framework,

you can work across the five indicators, attempting to identify which one is closest to your current situation.

Of course, 25 aspects may be too many to discuss in a single meeting and it might be more sensible to select those aspects you are particularly interested in. There is one point to note, however. The wording of the first five aspects (WS1–WS5) in the "people" section, unlike that of the following 20 aspects, does not include EfS. These five more generic aspects can be thought of as so fundamental that every school needs to attend to them before it is ready to be an adequate seeding ground for EfS. Therefore, it is suggested that, however you choose to explore the framework, these first five underpinning aspects receive your very early attention.

It is accepted that, for a given aspect, there may not be an indicator that exactly fits your current situation. For example, you might conclude that "for WS13 we are somewhere between 'emerging, and 'developing'". Again, you will probably notice that there are areas of overlap between some of the aspects; this is hardly surprising in such an integrating exercise as EfS. In summary, you should feel free to adapt the framework in any way you like to make as good a fit as you can with your particular situation.

What will undoubtedly begin to emerge from this process of self-identification are questions such as, "What, if anything, do we need to do about this aspect?", "On which aspects would we most like to see developments towards sustainability in our school?" and "Are there aspects that we are comfortable with in our current situation and see no immediate need for change?"

In fact, few schools these days are at the stage of thinking about EfS from scratch. For most schools, a third purpose for the framework will apply:

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3)   Providing a means by which a school that considers it *currently has* a whole-school approach to EfS can discuss its approach and possibly develop it further.

In this case, much of the above will apply. However, for those schools that are well under way with their programmes, the framework may be especially useful as a sounding board when review processes are called for. Here, schools are even more likely to select sections of the framework (for example, "place") for detailed discussion and special focus.

It should be noted that there is no suggestion that all schools should be aiming for "well developed" on all 25 aspects. To emphasise this, the framework's headings are deliberately neutral terms ("absent", "preparatory", "emergent", and so on) rather than value-laden terms ("better", "superior", and so on). There are two reasons for this. Firstly, EfS is a continuously evolving process; because people and environments themselves are never static, no end-point can ever be reached. "Mission accomplished" is not possible. Secondly, it may be that, in your situation, a whole-school approach may **not** be the best way to tackle a given aspect. Is it more likely to be achieved by assigning a particular group in the school community to act on everyone's behalf?

One thing cannot be emphasised too strongly. The framework is **not** intended to be used as a way of drawing comparisons between one school and another. It is **not** a summative assessment tool. Rather, it is a vehicle to promote enlightened in-house enquiry and discussion, and its use should be accorded the confidentiality paid to all honest, in-house discussion.

Hopefully, in fulfilling one or more of these three purposes, the framework can make a valuable contribution towards education for sustainability in your school.

Please forward any feedback about the framework to Dr Chris Eames, the director of the team of researchers who have developed it as part of a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative project. Chris's email address is: c.eames@waikato.ac.nz.