

Northern Ireland, UK • School - Community Partnerships in action

A special thanks to Sandra Patterson and Eco-Schools Northern Ireland for this contribution

Northern Ireland's Curriculum (introduced in 2007) covers 12 years of compulsory education. As the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) describe:

"It's a curriculum that focuses on the learning process and learners' needs, as well as their knowledge, understanding and skills. [...] This guidance expands upon the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (2007 No. 46), by setting out the minimum requirements of the Northern Ireland Curriculum that should be taught at Key Stage 3, with examples, and supplements it by providing a detailed rationale to guide its interpretation. It represents the final approved outcomes of a series of proposals and consultations which informed revisions to the Northern Ireland Curriculum (2006)². As a result of these each school now has additional flexibility to make decisions about how best to interpret and combine minimum requirements so as to provide a broad and balanced curriculum that will prepare each young person for a rapidly changing world." (CEA, 2022¹⁶⁷).

The following contribution highlights one upper-secondary school's efforts to integrate sustainability throughout the school. Department Head and Eco-School Coordinator Sandra Patterson also shares with us her vision of a more centralised approach to environmental education to reduce the inconsistency of approaches and levels of understanding between schools:

"The government needs a centralised approach to environmental education with set requirements for each educational provider this would reduce inconsistency of approach and levels of understanding between schools. A centralised approach would also give environmental education the respect that it deserves"

Sandra Patterson

Our school, [Ulidia Integrated College](#), is situated in Carrickfergus along the rural urban fringe of Belfast. It is an Integrated School, meaning that we educate together students from Protestant, Catholic other and nonreligious



Students at Ulidia Integrated College were inspired by their environmental work to undertake an environmental theme while studying A Level Photography. This photo was designed and taken by Karl as part of his A2 Photography course

backgrounds. The school has been engaged with sustainability related education since 2007 when the school first engaged with the Eco Schools programme. The Eco Schools¹⁶⁸ framework provides a structure that supports or decision making and our planning.

The school has engaged in a range of projects to enhance environmental education and whole school sustainability. This range has been decided by national focus areas of Eco Schools and by student interest as time has evolved. Students decide areas of focus in our committee meetings. Our school has identified the following vision statement 'Highest standards of global education for all to create tomorrow's sustainable society'. This vision has informed

planning and decision making throughout the whole school. Environmental education is integrated into whole school curriculum and is regularly audited to measure coverage. The school also works with other community organisations and other schools to increase engagement and interactions. The vision gives us focus for our actions and to identify our desired outcome. This vision is reaffirmed every year within the eco-team and displayed prominently in the school.

Some examples of a WSA in action include our annual Green Day event organised by year 8 students. This is a whole school day of activities to promote care for our environment on a local, national and global scale. During the day we collapse the timetable for all of year 8 and we invite local primary schools as well as local organisations to the school to participate in a whole day of environmental action. This involves taking part in a special timetable of events including workshops, school-based actions, and community based actions. The year group is divided into groups to mix classes and let students work with students that they might not usually be in class with and experience the workshops in a carousel type manner. The highlight of the day is always the wellington boot competition for me however, for the students the highlight is always named as the bird of prey display in the afternoon. This is when we all come together on the grass banks at the front of the school or if weather forces us, the hall, to enjoy a bird of prey display where students get to handle the birds and learn about them.

The birds of prey illustrate an important part of environmental education, students need to love nature and see the benefit of natural environments in order to want to protect it. Over the day students use and further develop numeracy, literacy, creative skills while also building Technology, Science, Geography and Citizenship knowledge through a fun cross curricular day of activities. This event has been successful as it has enabled us to build relationships with local primary schools, as well as with local organisations including the National Trust, Triocre, Ulster wildlife, Starbucks and the local council. Within the day we also have competitions running and gifts for all participants to take home – usually a packet of seeds, so the Green Day ends up being about a lot more than just one day.

One great starting point for us has been the Eco Mentor Programme. Within our whole school mentor programme, we created a sub group of Eco Mentors who are students in Sixth form that have displayed commitment to the Eco Team/committee and who want to gain vital experience in working with young people to support their applications to further education. This has been low cost to establish. The Eco Mentors work with staff from both our school and our neighbouring primary schools to develop an action plan,

this involves planning eco activities for class 5 to participate in each Friday afternoon for two academic terms. Starting in October and finishing at Easter. Students then visit the local primary school and work with a class and their teacher to support and lead environmental projects in the primary school. This programme has been very useful for both

Key WSA Principles in action at *Ulidia Integrated College (upper-secondary school)*

Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination

- Whole school community are part of forming and signing the schools eco-code which is update on a regular basis

Curriculum

- ESD mainstreamed in curricula of secondary education schools in Mongolia reaching out to over 500.000 students and 26.000 teachers
- School text textbooks and examination formats adjusted and aligned to ESD principles

Pedagogy & Learning

- Environmental education has been built into the whole curriculum (teacher lead not national curriculum)
- Cross Curricular engagement with environmental education

Institutional Practices

- Reducing waste and energy consumption has been a big focus of the school
- Sustainable transport is also a key focus which it taught throughout the curriculum and links to community events
- Whole school engagements with Eco Code

Community Connections

- Coastal surveys connected to the local landscape (Carrickfergus Castle) giving the students em-pathy for the local land, wildlife and coastline
- Eco-Mentoring programme connects the school's sustainability efforts and students to multiple community organisations and other local schools
- National teacher networks used to share ideas
- International networks used to develop school pairing projects

Capacity building

- [Eco-Schools Northern Ireland](#) are a major support
- Training is available from multiple providers including Eco Schools NI
- Grants are available from multiple providers including Keep NI Beautiful



Eco-committee celebrating their green flag award - Ulidia Integrated College currently holds six Green Flag Awards

schools involved. Primary school students gain a role model sixth form student who they can learn from concerning environmental and social themes, this is beneficial also for the sixth form students as they gain various skills in this role-model position. Also, the primary school gets help with eco projects and to work towards a green flag application. The post primary school makes and maintains links with our neighbouring primary school and our students gain valuable experience and references that support their application to further education. The mentor programme was built upon to include visits by the primary school class to our school to take part in a lesson with a Y8 class with their mentor present as well as the link between the two classes.

This project also builds links between two integrated schools in our community. Another low cost example is the school adopting (becoming guardians of this wildlife area) a coastal area around Carrickfergus Castle. Through this initiative the school arranges beach cleaning events there, this encourages both caring for the local wildlife, and regular visits to the sea. Also, via network links developed through other projects such as the Green Day event, other schools and the wider Carrickfergus community are also included in these beach cleaning days. Sometimes the weather is less than kind to us, but the students and the community are engaged which in turn creates a positive impact on the local area.

At Ulidia we take a Whole School Approach to environmental education and we learn by making 'real-life' changes. To date having an environmental focus has been very successful for the school as it has lowered our energy

costs, reduced waste, which in turn has reduced waste management costs and has also brought the school lots of positive publicity, as well as created and developed links with organizations and the wider community. For example, we are the first and still the only secondary school to run with zero waste into landfill in Northern Ireland. Changes like this means the schools management board are fully supportive of having an environmentally focused school. As the Eco-School coordinator each year I devise a development plan, and this is linked to whole school development. The plan is evaluated regularly and amended as I would do in my curriculum planning. As like all areas of school life I plan an engaging approach which is child centred and have systems in place to support its implementation. To enable the programme to run efficiently I have also established systems which have been in place for many years now. I have put in place a hierarchy of action to enable leadership to be built into the programme such as the Eco team and an eco-committee. The committee is where the planning is completed and this includes a parent representative, and a student leader. Within the committee we have student leadership which comprises of a student elected representative from the sixth form members of the group who have usually been in the committee/team for their school lifetime. This gives the students in the group something to aspire to and provides an opportunity for the elected sixth former to gain skills and experience for UCAS. As well as giving a committed student recognition for their service. The eco-team is where the day to day activities take place. The eco-team meet each week and implement the plans made by the committee, all the committee members are also part of the team. I oversee all actions and ensure that all activities

are risk assessed with a team of school staff who are also involved in a supporting capacity. I have also found that over the years students' and teachers are very keen to be a supporting part as well and this gives them the opportunity to build skills to take with them to future posts.

The student body of the school have devised their Eco Code, this gives students ownership of their code and enables them to have a say on key priorities. We regularly hold a whole school competition with fair trade chocolate as a prize (we are also certified as a Fairtrade school). This is held often as we regularly review the code to ensure that it reflects current student opinions and priorities. We use the lines of the school name to devise this and give the students the opportunity to write a line each. This gives the maximum number of children the opportunity to contribute and when judging the entries we always ensure that a range of year groups are included within the winners, again maximising the contributions.

Each year at the start of the academic year we reaffirm the code and reinforce the importance of environmental commitment by giving every person in and associated with the school the opportunity to 'sign up' to the code. A copy signed by all staff including teachers, support staff. Lsa's, cleaners, dinner staff is on display for all to see in the main entrance to the school. I feel that it is important that all members of the school staff team are included in this

together and that students can see a visible document to show a united staff team.

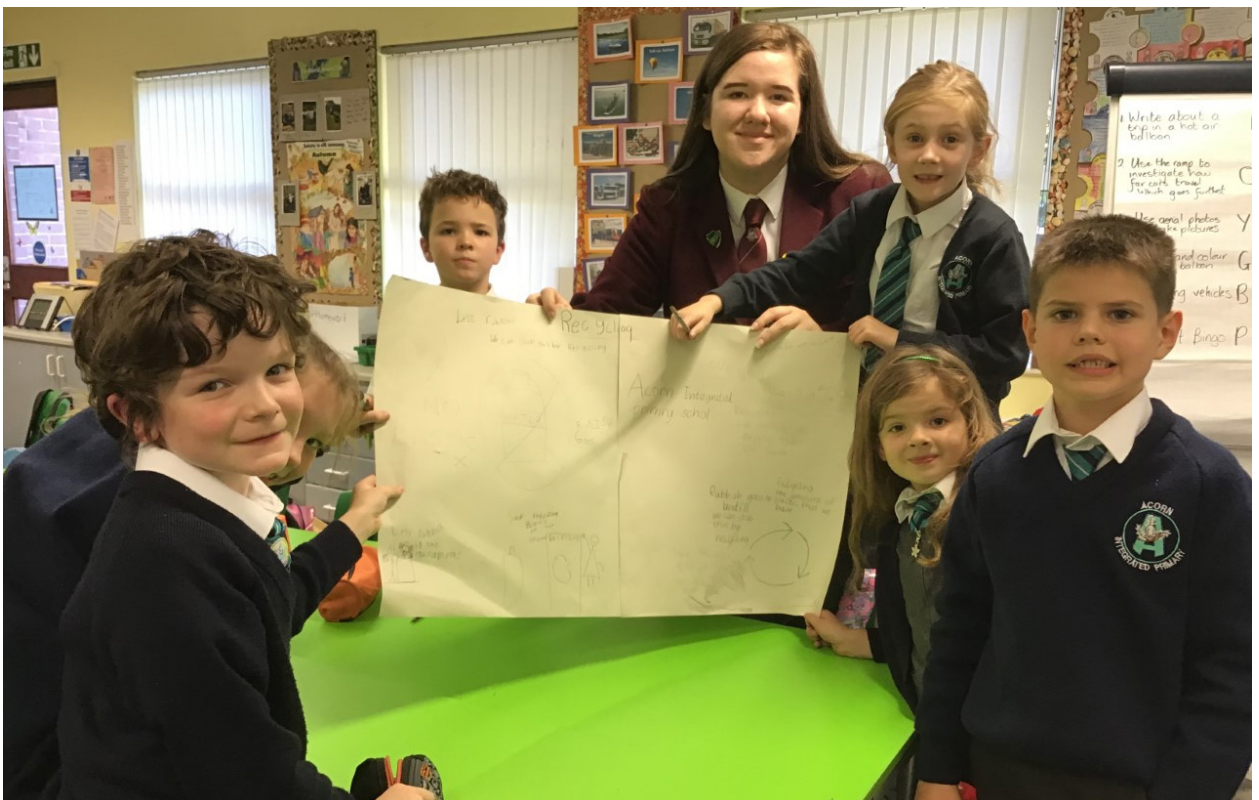
Parents and governors are given access to a digital copy of the code and can sign up digitally. We involved parents, so that they can support from home and to encourage families to also make changes following the schools lead. The school governors kept informed, and we ensure they have the opportunity to give support and get involved.

Students are given the chance to sign up in their form groups and their signed copy in on display in every form room in the school. **The physical signing gives all the school stakeholders the opportunity to make a physical promise to uphold the code and brings together all of our school community.**

It is also important to us as an integrated school that the code is displayed in a multilingual fashion to give all students in our school ownership and a sense of belonging to the code.

Institutional Practice • The College has worked hard to embed zero waste to landfill as a whole school area of focus. This has been invested in financially by the school has led to large reductions in carbon footprints and has seen the college be the first in Northern Ireland to achieve Zero waste to landfill status.

Sixth form Students work with local primary school pupils on environmentally focussed project work





Students, staff and parents all are given the opportunity to sign the revised school eco-code each year

Our school has embedded Sustainable transport throughout the school curriculum and pastoral care policies, along with creating leadership roles for senior pupils. This: [Translink 25th Anniversary - YouTube](#)¹⁶⁹. Whilst undertaking the challenge each year the college has also saw a number of other benefits to whole school life, including having the challenge embedded within the pastoral programme in Year 9.

The college has been actively engaged with Translink for 10 years now through the annual [Translink Travel Challenge](#)¹⁷⁰. This engagement has brought about many marked advantages for the College. Firstly, publicity. The college has raised awareness of itself within the community through news coverage of the challenge each year. We have also found that awareness has increased of sustainable transportation and the impact that this has on our personal carbon footprints. Staff have noticed that students are bringing this into classroom conversation when studying carbon footprints when they are further up the school journey. This has given us confidence that the challenge in Year 9 is having an impact of student choices long term. This increase in awareness of how transport choices impact carbon footprint is important and has an impact on tomorrow's sustainable society, which was one of our original aims.

Another positive outcome from the challenge has been the links that we have established with Translink through the challenge. Over the years these have grown with the foresight of Miss McKee to now include regular visits from the safety bus and Translink attending our open evening events. The impact from this is that students are more informed when choosing school travel and students are

given the opportunity to learn about safe sustainable travel. The safety bus visits to the school are a real highlight as the students really enjoy the visits from Sue and learn in a fun practical way from her lessons. It is our hope that the lessons that they learn about safety will help students to make safer decisions and habits which will stay with them beyond their school journey.

Whole school carbon footprint has been reduced. During the challenge we can take a snapshot of miles travelled in a sustainable manner and we can measure this reduction over the cycle. The measurement over the snapshot is logged within the Eco Schools.

Data zone as a short-term snap of reduction. However, what we have seen is that beyond the cycle challenge students are changing their actions, for example, choosing to walk to school more with their friends, or to lift share more, and to take train or bus more often. These actions are not measured every day but show that the carbon footprint of school travel is being reduced in the long term by taking these small actions over long term across the school. Leanne has told us about how her actions have changed for the 5 years in Ulidia after taking part in the challenge in Year 9, this is multiplied by 10 years of year groups where some students will be inspired to change actions and creates a large reduction in carbon over this long term engagement with the challenge.

As an Eco School we found that the challenge gave us the opportunity to 'bank' data evidence which was counted towards our bi-annual Green Flag applications. This data and participation in the challenge counted as a 'major' topic area within the application process. The Challenge gave us a framework to collect this data and have it recorded securely in the data zone of our Eco Schools portal.

Environmental education is fully integrated into whole school curriculum. However, this is spearheaded by the school not through the national curriculum requirements. We have organised this by Mapping curriculum links against the Eco Schools areas of focus and then using this to identify any areas of weakness that need to be addressed. This was completed collaboratively as a whole school.

In terms of professional development, we take advantage of any training available. Staff have undertaken UN Climate Change teacher training to gain UNCCT status, [Global Learning Programme](#)¹⁷¹ training, and we have taken advantage of carbon literacy training with Eco Schools NI. Staff work collaboratively both in the training times and also during planning time.

Advice for other schools • The Vision is important, it is really central to planning that a vision is clear and shared

with stakeholders. The process of defining the vision was central to identifying what we wanted to achieve and why. The vision also helped us to identify key actions and not go on too many tangents. Build your own community. This was very important. The team that we have built have been sources of inspiration, opportunity and sounding boards. The network built has been through attending events, training and simply keeping an ear to the ground. The team have opened doors and opportunities in many ways. My advice would be to take opportunities to talk to people and always exchange contact details. Building a community network has been one of the most important things I have done as an Eco-Coordinator and has helped me to support others.

Lead with passion and confidence, I have found that it is important to lead while being unashamedly passionate about my ethos. Students feel that it is ok to care if they see adults caring from the front. Leadership is important. Don't be afraid to be publicly passionate about the area of leadership. I am a keen environmentalist and I shout this

from the rooftops as I believe in the importance of our environment. In turn the students have been confident to also allow their passions to be visible and stand up for what they believe.

Expect the unexpected and be open to opportunities as they come along. I have built banks of resources, paperwork files such as risk assessments that have been built over time and are returned to in order to inform future plans. It is important to be prepared for literally anything that can happen, a bank of resources has also been made for go to activities if speakers cancel at the last moment, or if there is a weather emergency during a planned activity.

Be open to opportunities as they arise. Opportunities to learn more, opportunities to work with others and opportunities to develop have all been taken advantage of, sometimes you have to be the nippy one who gets in there and claims the opportunity. And if you can't find one, make one.



Mrs Sandra Patterson, Head of Geography and Eco-School Coordinator at Ulidia Integrated College attending the [COP26 teacher event](#)¹²² by OCCE in Glasgow to share her experiences.

Strengths/prospects

- ESD at the school is supported by teachers and governors as well as teaching staff. This enabled a holistic approach to be taken
- Eco Schools NI have been a tower of strength and provided excellent resources and advice over the years, giving many opportunities for developing and expanding ESD
- Having local 'sister schools' makes inspiring collaboration opportunities
- Not being afraid to lead with passion!

Challenges

- A centralised government approach to ESD is lacking and not supportive of a WSA, so top down support from the curriculum is needed
- There are always some students who doesn't want to be involved, this is a challenge but shouldn't be a discouragement
- There will always be a shortage of time
- Financial resources