

10 Principles of Sustainability Education

Sustainability education is fundamentally about values, with respect at the centre. This includes respect for present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, and for the resources of the planet we inhabit (United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development). Sustainability education does not reside solely within the formal education system and does not focus only on environmental education. It is about lifelong learning and understanding ourselves as well as others and our links with the wider natural and social environment.

In March 2007, more than 75 educators, government officials and students came together at the “Why Sustainability Education?” event, held at the SFU Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver. By the end of the day participants had identified the following principles:

1. Sustainability education is really just about good education.

While sustainability education is about meeting contemporary challenges, it builds on teaching and learning wisdom that have developed over time through many different cultures. It is learner focused and incorporates the stages of action, reflection and practice.

2. Sustainability education commits to new ways of thinking about—and being in—the world.

Education must be ecological in the sense that it illuminates interconnections and the subtle wisdom of ‘enough’. As Rick Kool from Royal Roads University says, education must encourage “living like we plan on staying here”.

3. Sustainability education needs to be integrated not inserted.

It is not so much a subject on its own, but the lens through which other subjects need to be understood and taught.

4. Sustainability education demands both leadership and collaboration.

Educators need to model the change we want to see. We cannot realize sustainability in education without support and leadership from faculty, staff, administration, and community. We need to participate in valuable work going on, support and improve existing projects, and create meaningful partnerships. Working across sectors is challenging but worthwhile.

5. Sustainability education encourages us to take risks and to address hard questions.

Experimentation with uncertainty, ongoing discussion and adaptation, and critical thinking are all important. In our resource-based province, it’s vital to address directly the personal risk felt by those who fear loss of their livelihood due to an increased focus on sustainability.

6. Sustainability education draws from a diversity of cultural traditions.

BC has a wealth of cultures and traditions. We need to create education that acknowledges, learns from, and incorporates the sustainable practices of all of these cultural groups.

7. The language of sustainability education must be simple and transferable.

The term ‘sustainability’ is difficult to define and has been mobilized for many, often conflicting, purposes. While we continue refining our understanding, educators need to ensure the core values of right livelihood, ecological integrity and social justice are embodied in the language of sustainability.

8. Sustainability education is about the individual and the collective.

Sustainability education is both about authentic personal transformation and community building. To questions of personal and collective, whether the proper focus of interventions surround transforming individuals or structures, educators suggest ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’.

9. Art, culture and creativity are vital for sustainability education.

The arts can play an important role in promoting reflection and inspiring individual and collective creative action.

10. Sustainability education is dynamic, positive and contains hopeful messages.

Sustainability education must adapt to changing circumstances. Hope and excitement inspire positive change more than guilt and fear. We need to provide concrete tools that individuals can use and to celebrate success.