

Policy Brief on Education

How can education systems support today the transitions towards greener and fairer economies and societies in Latin America?

Key highlights

- Education is central to support countries' transitions to greener and fairer economies and societies. It can shape profoundly transformative aspects of people's lives today, such as what they will demand to their governments, the lifestyles they will choose, or the jobs they will have. Education is therefore about how societies can achieve this urgent change.
- Beyond making environmental sustainability an educational goal, policy makers need strategies that help translate students' knowledge into citizens' transformative actions. For this, policy makers must nurture pro-environmental attitudes along with science and environmental proficiency.
- Impactful sustainable education puts the students at the centre of broader social, economic, and technological evolutions. This requires education systems to adopt encompassing approaches by, for example, nurturing science education teaching practices that engage students with their contexts.

What's the issue?

Climate change is the defining and urgent challenge of our times and education is critical to help meet this challenge at all levels. Among others, education can shape those behaviours from tomorrow's citizens that:

- push for political commitments, whether that's financing parties or social activism
- impact local communities, such as volunteering or community services
- influence business practices, including the way we consume, our lifestyle, or where we choose to work or to invest.

Tackling the challenge of climate change therefore requires empowering tomorrow's citizens with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours they will need to act and shape economies and societies (OECD, 2022[2]).

Sustainability is now part of most school systems' education goals, but there is little evidence that these goals alone make a difference to students' learning for sustainable action. As reported to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), almost 90% of 15-year-old students were in schools where principals indicated that climate change and global warming are included in their formal curriculum (OECD, 2022[4]).

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While this is a good start, what matters for impact is that teachers and schools can effectively help students to incorporate sustainability in their overall learning experience, and that what they learn in the class is effectively connected to the broader social, economic or technological evolutions taking place around them and beyond.

Moving beyond knowledge and skills to action

Beyond developing knowledge and skills, education systems need to nurture active citizens that engage in effective environmental action. Findings from PISA offer three key lessons of interest (OECD, 2022[4]):

1. **Knowledge alone may not always lead to action.** It is the combination of science proficiency and pro-environmental attitudes (such as students' sense of purpose) that makes action more likely.
2. **Together we are stronger.** Action is more likely to occur when students are in close contact with school peers or parents who are also involved in environmental actions, suggesting that school programmes focused on communities rather than only the individual students, can be more impactful.
3. **Context matters and one size does not fit all.** Students experience climate change differently depending on their geographical, social or economic context. Their personal backgrounds may also influence how they respond to sustainability education. For example, students who are girls and/or socio-economically advantaged are more likely to have an environmental sense-of-purpose than those who are boys and/or socio-economically disadvantaged. Governments also need to strike a balance between setting central goals for sustainability education and supporting locally designed approaches that best fit the needs of students and communities.

As such, these lessons point as well to the need for education systems to be able to support the challenge of sustainability through multiple angles.

Towards a more encompassing OECD approach to sustainable development through education

More recently, emerging initiatives from the OECD will further support countries' transitions to sustainable economies. These initiatives aim, for example, through the Education Policies for a Sustainable Future project, to help future-proof climate education strategies, or through the Education Policy Outlook, to investigate countries' policy efforts to empower all learners to go green (positioning education as a critical sector for a sustainable society today, shaping the green economy, and translating learners' environmental awareness into action). Work on higher education is analysing the role of higher education institutions in fostering innovation competencies, and the Teaching for Climate Action initiative has investigated cross-sectoral collaboration on sustainability for teaching professionalism.

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Examples from OECD countries

In Colombia, the Inter-Institutional Committees for Environmental Education (CIDEA, 2014), are an example of a transversal policy effort that promotes synergies between the education sector and other sectors at subnational level (OECD, Forthcoming[5]). The CIDEA are bodies established in the subnational jurisdictions with the aim to support the implementation of the national Policy for Environmental Education at regional level. They act as subnational platforms that establish plans of action for this and promote collaboration between different sectors, including education institutions and civil society, on aspects related to environmental education (Márquez Domínguez, J.A., Llamas Chávez, J.L. (directores), 2019[5]). Actors involved in their activities may include representatives from very diverse sectors, including education, agriculture, indigenous institutions, social services, business representatives, or health.

Along with guiding the contextualisation of the national environmental education policies at regional level, tasks carried out by the CIDEA may vary as well. These may include, for example, keeping track of the projects and institutions undertaking environmental education projects; providing guidance for the development of related initiatives; or establishing communication strategies (CDA, 2023[6]). Moving forward, the CIDEA need to balance the challenge of helping local level institutions go beyond siloed approaches and connect as a community to national goals, while remaining sensitive and relevant to local social and educational needs.

Suggested policy actions

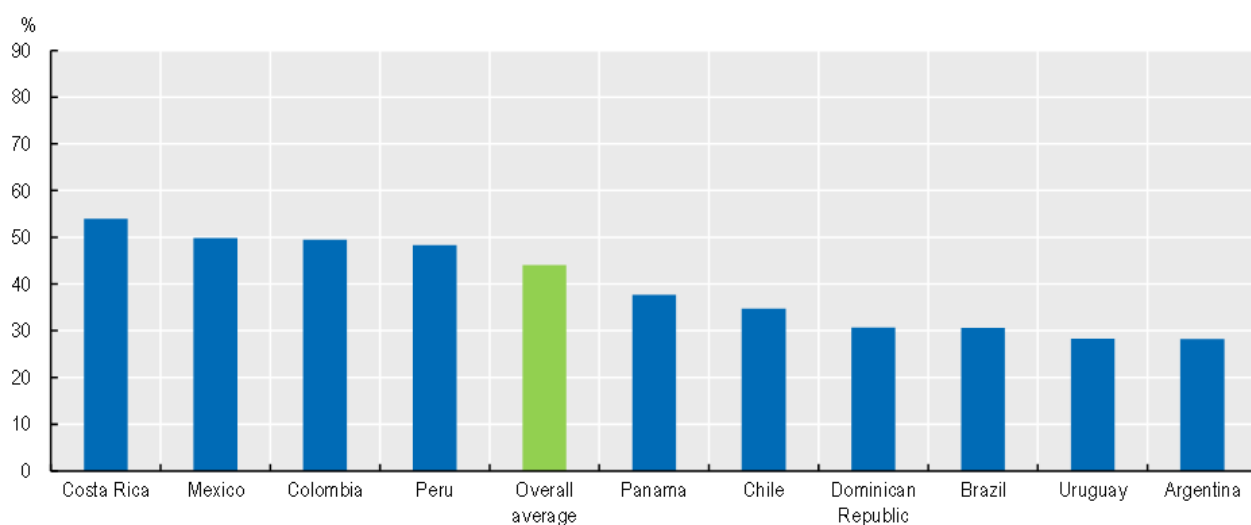
Encourage cross-sectoral initiatives that involve education. By shaping people's knowledge, skills and behaviours, education for sustainability is a key implementation support for broader policies aimed at the transition to greener and fairer economies. As such, it needs to be seen and given the space to function in cross-sectoral strategies (OECD, Forthcoming[3]).

Promote a science education that engages students with their contexts. In Latin America, overall science performance in PISA remains below average, and fewer than half of students reported engaging in environmental actions (Figure 1). Effective teaching requires rethinking traditional science education, helping students to better understand the complex interactions of ecological and social systems to motivate them to act (Nusche, D. and M. Fuster Rabella, forthcoming[1]).

Support transdisciplinary teaching and learning. Most school systems aim to teach sustainability and climate change as cross-curricular themes rather than as dedicated subjects. However, actors in the education system may not necessarily feel able to accomplish this. In the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), fewer than 30% of teachers in participating countries and economies including Brazil, Colombia and Chile, reported that they felt well prepared for teaching cross-curricular skills (OECD, 2019[7]). To integrate knowledge from different disciplines and connect it with local and traditional knowledge in communities, countries need to promote teacher collaboration, inquiry and assessment, supported by innovative assessment tools, in line with transdisciplinary learning goals (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020[8]; Nusche, D. and M. Fuster Rabella, forthcoming[1]).

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Figure 1. Percentage of 15-year-old students who reported participating in activities in favour of environmental protection (PISA 2018)



Note: Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the percentage of students.

Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database.

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References

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- [6] CDA (2023), Comités Interinstitucionales de Educación Ambiental CIDEA, <https://cda.gov.co/es/ninos-y-adolescentes/cidea>.
- [5] Márquez Domínguez, J.A., Llamas Chávez, J.L. (directores) (2019), Hélices y anclas para el desarrollo local. Huelva : Diputación Provincial de Huelva, <https://rabida.uhu.es/dspace/handle/10272/17416>.
- [8] Nusche, D. and M. Fuster Rabella (forthcoming), Education Policies for a Sustainable Future, OECD Publishing.
- [3] OECD (2022), Are Students Ready to Take on Environmental Challenges?, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/8abe655c-en>.
- [1] OECD (2022), Declaration on Building Equitable Societies Through Education, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0485>.
- [7] OECD (2022), Global Teaching Insights, <https://www.globalteachinginsights.org/channel/Climate+Action/212779523>.
- [2] OECD (2020), Curriculum Overload: A Way Forward, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3081ceca-en>.
- [9] OECD (2019), TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en>.
- [4] OECD (Forthcoming), Education Policy Outlook 2023: Empowering all learners to go green, OECD.

Further reading

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- OECD (2022), Are Students Ready to Take on Environmental Challenges?, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/8abe655c-en>. OECD (2022), "Teaching for climate action", Teaching in Focus, No. 44, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d3a72e77-en>.