



How can I make sustainability matter to school decision-makers?

1. Transform their Understanding of School Sustainability

Where people most often fall short is by sticking to a narrow understanding of sustainability. **Sustainability is not just an environmental thing.** Instead, it's an umbrella term that covers the pillars of social, economic and environmental wellbeing, and all three pillars must be healthy for a system to function properly.

Focusing solely on environmental concerns can narrow the conversation and exclude individuals with other interests and priorities. By adjusting your focus and approach, you can demonstrate the benefits of sustainability for things that are higher priorities for school decision-makers. For example, instead of focusing on the benefits of sustainability for the environment, demonstrate its benefits for members of the school community (see the myriad benefits of school sustainability [here](#)).

2. Align with the School's Mission

One of the most effective ways to interest school decision-makers in sustainability is to align it with the school's mission. If administrators can see sustainability as connected to their mission, it will become more of a priority rather than *just another thing*.

Becoming well-versed in the school's mission statement and values should enable you to align them with the social, economic and environmental outcomes of becoming more sustainable. This way, you can **talk on the administration's terms** and demonstrate how becoming more sustainable is in the school's best interest.

3. Communicate through the "Whole School Sustainability" lens

If your school is on a tight budget, it's unlikely that school decision-makers will be open to learning about installing electric vehicle charging stations, or even to installing recycling bins around campus. That's why the "Whole School Sustainability" approach is so helpful - it demonstrates how there are facets of sustainability that every school can embrace, no matter their means or resources.

The Whole School Sustainability framework, which forms the backbone of GSA's Sustainability Tracking and Roadmap Tool (START), integrates sustainability into a school's Physical Place, Organizational Culture and Educational Programs. While a low-resourced school may not be able to integrate many sustainability metrics into its Physical Place (e.g. setting up and maintaining a school composting system), it should be able to integrate sustainability into its Organizational Culture (e.g. having an Equity and Inclusion Committee) and Educational Programs (e.g. offering sustainability-related course content derived from free GSA teaching resources).

Schools should be encouraged and empowered to take action where they can; every small step in the right direction will move the needle forward.



START meets you where you are

Each START metric includes an indication of that sustainability action's **Cost, Difficulty, and Impact through a rating out of 5.** This helps schools to choose actions that align with their priorities and resources.



For example, a school seeking low-cost solutions can look for metrics with a Cost rating of 1 or 2. And a school looking for high-impact actions can look for metrics with an Impact rating of 4 or 5.



The ratings for an action's Impact and Difficulty are added to your school's START score. (For the sake of equity, the Cost rating is excluded from the points calculation.)

How can I make sustainability matter to my peers?

1. Pull, don't push

People don't like being told what to do, and they especially don't like when someone steps on their turf. Telling your school administrators or other teachers what needs to happen could theoretically work, but it will cause friction. Even when you're armed with data that proves the vast benefits of moving towards sustainability, it's likely you'll antagonize some people by pushing them towards it, and by burning these bridges you'll limit how far you go in the long term – no matter how good the data is.

The other route, which takes much longer and **requires more patience**, is to gradually pull them towards sustainability. **Get them curious.** While it's possible to collect data and present it to the administration yourself all within a month, you'll likely have far more allies and buy-in if you 'go gently', even if it takes two years.

2. Work on building positive relationships

Be careful not to tread on people's toes. If you're the person criticizing how things are being done and giving unsolicited advice, you're not likely to win many allies. You may have a better way to run composting or recycling at your school, but instead of telling the person responsible that you have a better idea, let the data do the talking (unless, of course, someone asks for advice).

3. Celebrate what's already being done

It's so important to celebrate what has already been achieved with regards to sustainability in the school. **Learn about what everybody's doing already.** In this way, people will feel appreciated for the work they've done, and you'll invite more action rather than burn bridges by making people feel unappreciated, sidelined or criticized. This "[Appreciative Inquiry](#)" approach fosters collaboration and facilitates people's strengths, with the **focus on solutions rather than problems.**



Appreciative Inquiry Process

1. **Define** – What is the desired outcome? What does our school need more of?
2. **Discover** – Appreciating *what is*. What are our strengths? Rediscover and appreciate what is and what already works.
3. **Dream** – Imagining *what could be*. What would work well in the future?
4. **Design** – Deciding *what should be*. What action do we need to take to make it happen?
5. **Deploy** – *What will be?* We're taking that action.

Learn more [here](#).



How can I be more persuasive?

How can I get administrators to take me seriously and to listen to my ideas for advancing sustainability at my school?

1. Know your audience

Identify the main players in your school and try to **build a positive rapport** with them. Understand the priorities and personalities of the people involved, and communicate in a way that takes these into consideration – **show how sustainability adds value to what matters to them.**

You also need to be strategic in how you get people on board. For example, if you're 25 years old, how can you get someone who's been at the school for 25 years to listen to you? You could, for example, demonstrate how moving towards sustainability aligns with the established mission and values of the school.

2. Know your concepts

It really helps to be fluent in the different categories of sustainability and what areas of the school they impact. You will also be far more effective and credible if you're able to answer questions off the top of your head, without having to check through documents.

This is one of the reasons why *START: Sustainability Tracking and Roadmap Tool* is so helpful – it breaks up the complexity of Whole School Sustainability into much smaller and more manageable chunks, explains the concepts and why they matter. Become familiar with the explanations and language of START's metrics, and familiarize yourself with actionable steps contained in START's 'How To' Guides so that you have a starting point for plans of action.

3. Communicate clearly and effectively

Don't assume that everyone understands you or already agrees with you; **people have different opinions and levels of understanding and knowledge about sustainability.**

Be careful not to slip into using sustainability jargon that might exclude or confuse the people you're working with, and rather communicate clearly, in a way that anyone could understand.

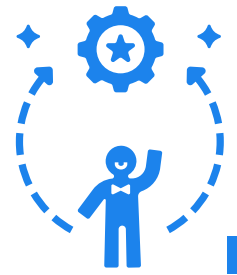


START as a Collaborative & Educational Tool

Sustainability is a complex concept with many layers and parts – it would be difficult to become an expert on all of its pieces! Luckily, you don't have to be. By creating a START team with diverse members (with different interests, areas of knowledge and skills), you can **divide and conquer.**

For example, teachers or academic heads can take the lead on the Educational Programs metrics, while administrators or communications department lead the Organizational Culture metrics, and the facilities manager can lead the Physical Place metrics. However, remember a key principle of the [Whole School Sustainability approach](#): **Break down silos and get individuals from across your organization to work together.**

START also includes an explanation of each sustainability metric and why it matters, as well as Resources and Discussion Forums for each metric -- meaning your team doesn't have to start from scratch! Together, START Schools can build on each others' collective knowledge and experiences to support each others' sustainability journeys.



How can I maximize my effectiveness?

If you're the staff member trying to lead sustainability efforts at your school, these strategies can help boost your effectiveness.

1. Ask for the Title

Every ship needs a captain. It helps for people to know where to turn to when they need help, so having the title of 'Sustainability Coordinator' can result in more progress. Schools that want to improve their overall sustainability need a Sustainability Coordinator – someone who can **liaise between various stakeholders, provide knowledge and expertise, and steer the ship in the right direction.**

In rare cases, a Sustainability Coordinator is a program manager *without* a teaching load, who can devote all of their time to advancing school sustainability initiatives. However, in most cases, Sustainability Coordinators are faculty members with teaching loads who **take on the role as one of their extra-curricular duties** (e.g. instead of managing a sports team). If your school does not yet have an official 'sustainability person', consider proposing the idea to your school administrators and request that they create an official role so that school sustainability initiatives can continue even with staff turnover.

In general terms, a 'Sustainability Coordinator' is someone responsible for managing and pursuing the school's sustainability plan. A Sustainability Coordinator's duties will vary depending on the size, resources and priorities of the school, but generally their responsibilities may include:

- Liaising with representatives from all sectors of the school community, including Principals, food services, administrative and facilities staff, and wherever possible, parents and students, to develop and implement sustainability initiatives at the school.
- Advising school decision-makers about school sustainability planning.
- Facilitating the collection of data on the school's sustainability across a broad range of metrics. (START: Sustainability Tracking and Roadmap Tool simplifies this process.)
- Periodically holding meetings to coordinate school sustainability efforts.

2. Change attitudes, not just programs

If you make your role all about the programs that you set up as Sustainability Coordinator, those programs could fall apart when you leave. But if you can change the attitude towards sustainability, you can lay the foundations for real and lasting change.

Help your peers **understand the vast benefits of school sustainability**, and **align it with your schools vision and mission.**

3. Manage and delegate, rather than doing it all yourself

The importance of this last tip cannot be overstated! You can have a far greater impact by managing and delegating than trying to implement changes yourself.

Similar to a business manager who needs to understand the customer, product and how to streamline the process of providing a good or service, as Sustainability Coordinator, you need to understand what is required of school sustainability, the decision-makers and processes involved, and how to facilitate things getting done. You don't need to organize recycling or food procurement yourself; **find your teams and allow them to do the work.**

Collaborating for Change

The Green Schools Alliance is a peer-to-peer network of school sustainability champions, collaborating to empower schools to become sustainable. *Our strength is in the contributions of our members.* If you have had success in using START or implementing successful sustainability programs at your school, we would love to interview you! Contact guides@greenschoolsalliance.org.

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