

# ***Sustainable education: review, rethink and reform***

## **Introduction**


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There is now convincing evidence that the world is warming at the fastest rate for over 100,000 years and that humans are responsible. It is estimated that the effects of global warming will impact most heavily on those living in the poorest areas of the world. Concerns about sustainability are rooted in an acknowledgment that continuing as we are is no longer a viable option.

ATL believes that a genuinely sustainable society needs to do more than merely 'Reduce, Reuse and Recycle'. It also needs to 'Review, Rethink and Reform' its values, attitudes and practices in order to address the momentous challenges for our shared future. It is unsustainable that:

- 923 million people across the world go hungry;
- every five seconds, one child dies from hunger-related causes<sup>1</sup>;
- an additional 200-600 million people across the world are likely to face food shortages in the next 70 years due to changes in our climate;
- by 2050, the number of climate refugees is estimated to run into hundreds of millions;
- 75 million children worldwide miss out on an education<sup>2</sup>;
- nearly one billion people entered the 21st Century unable to read a book or sign their names<sup>3</sup>;
- almost 80% of the world's total population live on less than \$10 a day;
- in 2005, the wealthiest 20% of the world accounted for 76.6% of total private consumption<sup>4</sup>.

Meeting the challenges of creating a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace must progress from an acknowledgement and understanding of these global challenges to national, local and individual action<sup>5</sup>.



ATL believes that education is at the heart of creating a sustainable society. It is about learning and taking responsibility for our actions. Through education we prepare our children and young people for their role in a global society.

Schools, colleges and universities have a crucial role to play in educating for a sustainable future and being examples of sustainable values and practice. Educating for sustainability needs sustainable education<sup>6</sup>. ATL is concerned, however, that most of our educational values, institutions and practices are based on an unsustainable model of education.

### **What do we mean by sustainability?**

ATL supports the Brundtland Commission's<sup>7</sup> definition of sustainability as, "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Yet, the adoption of this concept of sustainability must not lead to an identification of unsustainable desires as 'needs'.

ATL detects a fundamental tension between sustainability, as a long-term consideration and aspiration, and the emphasis on economic growth, fuelled by competition and consumption. We believe that the industrialised world, as the biggest producer of greenhouse gases in particular, but also with the highest rates of economic growth, has an obligation to resolve this dilemma in favour of sustainability.

In ATL's view, sustainability is rooted in an understanding of the complex and interrelated environmental, economic, social, political and moral challenges our world is experiencing at present. It begins with a global perspective and is guided by universal values of equality, respect, empathy, dignity and justice, together with a commitment arising from a sense of responsibility and shared destiny to care and conserve. This global perspective should inform and underpin any national, local and individual action in the creation of a sustainable society.

### **A sustainable society needs a sustainable education policy**

Whilst ATL believes that education is key to creating a sustainable society, we are concerned about the increasing marketisation of education policy-making in the UK, which has introduced distinctive elements of competition and consumption primarily under the guise of school improvement but also in relation to the funding of colleges. These elements are most manifest in existing policies to 'raise standards' and in the involvement of private sector providers in education.

### ***Raising standards***

ATL is concerned that within the current context of 'raising standards', education is disproportionately expected to contribute to the creation of labour and skills to meet the needs of a commercial service economy and to ensure our international economic competitiveness and economic growth. The Government's Standards Agenda has led to an excessive focus on 'targets' and quantifiable results as a measure of a success. Pupils and students are effectively taught to view learning as being primarily about qualifications and degrees as commodities to be exchanged for appropriate jobs.

The annual publication of league tables meanwhile encourages competition between

schools, with less 'successful' schools in terms of performance labelled as 'failing' and threatened with closure. League tables have also crucially informed parental 'choice-making', especially by more affluent families, which has led to the pupil intake of schools being no longer reflective of the communities they were intended to serve.

Where the funding of colleges is related to outcomes, we are concerned that there will be a tendency amongst colleges to narrow courses to commercially viable options and to enrol primarily those students who are most likely to succeed within the prescribed parameters. Whilst there may be growth in student numbers, these numbers do not necessarily suggest a widening in participation across all sections of society. An emphasis on competition also means that colleges potentially see each other as rivals for students rather than potential collaborators working together to attract and retain those students for whom formal learning may be a daunting experience<sup>8</sup>.

ATL is also extremely concerned about cuts to adult and community education in favour of the redirection of funds to vocational training for business and industry. Recent figures suggest that 1.5 million adult and community education places in England have already disappeared in the past three years<sup>9</sup>. The progressive loss of adult and community learning undermines universal access to education, particularly of those who are out of work or struggle to find employment.

### ***Private sector involvement in education***

ATL has serious concerns about the sustainable principles of the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, which seeks to rebuild or refurbish all secondary schools in England and install high quality Information and Communication Technology as a means to transform learning and raise achievement. Not only has there been no specific reference to sustainability in the BSF launch document, but we are also aware that a majority of the school buildings which have already been built or rebuilt by profit-making companies through Private Finance Initiative (PFI) building and maintenance contracts, are often of poor quality<sup>10</sup>.

Problems have been experienced with ventilation, insulation, heating and space; these school buildings and learning environments are not sustainable, nor can they be necessarily expected to become sustainable as the same private company that built them is also often contracted to maintain them for a period of approximately 25 years<sup>11</sup>. Our members also report that it is not uncommon for repair and maintenance work to be carried out constantly in a PFI school, causing significant and unsustainable disruption to teaching and learning.

We know that at least three PFI schools were closed due to falling pupil rolls, but councils are still contracted to pay the bills<sup>12</sup>. In light of the recent economic crisis, it has also emerged that the Government is now planning to underwrite PFI deals and transfer the risk back from the private to the public sector to prevent the BSF programme from grinding to a halt<sup>13</sup>.

ATL believes that the marketisation of education is unsustainable. We therefore call for a fundamental Review, Rethink and Reform of the Government's current education policies in order that sustainability can become a reality in our educational institutions and practices and beyond.

### **The Government's sustainable schools strategy**

ATL welcomes the Government's commitment to transform every school into a sustainable school by 2020. The National Framework for sustainable schools, published by the Government in 2006<sup>14</sup>, identified eight doorways or entry points for schools to establish and develop sustainable practices. While maintaining in the 2008 guidance document<sup>15</sup> that the sustainable schools strategy is about: "driving school improvement through sustainable development", the Government also considers this initiative as a way to join up schools' work on a range of policies and initiatives, such as Every Child Matters, Healthy Schools, extended services, citizenship and learning outside the classroom.

ATL believes that despite the more comprehensive and inclusive vision and sustainable principles of the Every Child Matters agenda, the Government's approach to sustainable schools remains ultimately rooted in the promotion of a rather narrow national self-interest. There is an unmistakable tendency in the guidance materials to define 'school improvement' through sustainable development, in line with the Standards Agenda. The 2008 guidance document on planning for a sustainable school, for example, states an expectation on schools to contribute to national priorities: "where the need for this is clearly identified and agreed by the Government"<sup>16</sup>. National priorities such as the promotion of economic growth and competitiveness, however, do not sit comfortably with the priorities needed to meet the global challenges of sustainability.

ATL is concerned that due to the unsustainable tension within existing education policies and initiatives, the sustainable schools programme will fail to provide a coherent linking of the broader vision and principles of equity, fairness and justice contained in the Every Child Matters agenda with other priorities and initiatives. We also fear that the sustainable schools programme may become a mere add-on and a means primarily to mitigate some of the effects of our behaviour on the environment and global wellbeing rather than a genuine driver for the transformation of teaching and learning and the promotion of a sustainable society.

### **Preparing for sustainable education**

If our schools and colleges are to become genuinely sustainable places of teaching and learning, ATL believes that the time has now come to join up the dots. What is needed, in our view, is a renewed debate about the aims and values of education and of how these correspond to our aims for the promotion of children's wellbeing and a fair, equitable and just society. Within the context of such a debate, sustainable education is only effective if it is closely linked to addressing a range of concerns that have been consistently expressed by education staff and their unions, including calls for:

- an end to the further marketisation of the education system;
- the abolition of the current high stakes assessment and testing regime;
- the transformation of an accountability system which undermines and devalues teachers' professionalism and professional autonomy;

- the reform of a narrow and overtly restrictive curriculum;
- an end to long working hours, excessive workload and stress;
- a clear and fair system of rewards, incentives and career progression for a diverse workforce;
- fair employment conditions, opportunities for professional development and better career structures for term-time, part-time, temporary and support staff;
- consistent and effective equalities policies and practices, including comprehensive equalities education for leadership, governing bodies and as an integral part of Initial Teacher Training and continuing professional development;
- schools and colleges to be healthy and safe places of teaching and learning;
- adequate school and college resources to facilitate sustainable education from early years to further, higher and adult education;
- the meaningful and balanced involvement of pupils in decisions about their school or college and in determining the nature of their own learning;
- a greater role for communities to be involved in their schools and colleges, including through representation on governing bodies and through their local authorities.

### **A vision of sustainable education**

ATL believes that fully sustainable schools and colleges provide a genuinely broad and balanced education. By this we mean helping children and young people to develop a nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of the world in which they live. Sustainable education, in ATL's view, serves a profoundly social and moral purpose by developing a vision as well as a set of values that define a free, equal and just society.

ATL remains committed to education as an entitlement for all and as a process to rediscover, reclaim and promote our unity-in diversity. Sustainable education is a global vision and aspiration made real at local level. This starts with schools and colleges embracing and reflecting the diversity of their communities.

Sustainable education, in ATL's view, would include the following:

- universal access to education;
- a strong ethos together with the promotion of empathy, care and understanding;
- collaborative and community working;
- mutually supportive structures for all education staff;
- a curriculum that values creativity, innovation and critical thinking and which promotes a global perspective applied to local circumstances;
- valuing all education staff and having in place fair and clear structures for professional development and career progression;
- allowing pupils and students to take responsibility for important areas of their lives.

### **Conclusion**

ATL believes that sustainable education is the key to achieving a genuinely sustainable society. To make this vision a reality, ATL calls on the Government to:

- review its existing education policies and initiatives in line with the above principles of sustainable education by facilitating a proper debate about the aims of education and how these fit with our aims for promoting children's wellbeing and social justice;

- rethink the way schools and colleges are run by supporting local partnerships and ways of sharing effective practices to bring about change (i.e. less national prescription, more local innovation and creativity);
- reform the education system, by promoting consistent and joined up practice based on a coherent system of aims and values, to make it a more sustainable model.

## Footnotes

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3. UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 1999.
4. World Bank Development Indicators 2008 at: <http://web.worldbank.org>.
5. Preamble to the Earth Charter 2005 at: [www.earthcharterinaction.org](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org).
6. S. Sterling, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*, Schumacher Briefings, 6, Totnes: Green Books, 2001.
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8. H. Kennedy, *Learning Works-Widening Participation in Further Education*, (London, Further Education Funding Council, 1997).
9. The Guardian, *Second Chance*, 24 February 2009.
10. House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, *Sustainable Education: Are we building schools for the future?* vol.1, (2007), p.28 and Audit Commission, *PFI in Schools*, (2003).
11. Audit Commission, *PFI in Schools*, (2003).
12. House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, *Sustainable Education: Are we building schools for the future?*, vol.1, (2007), p.27.
13. The Guardian, *Government may have to take on risk of PFI deals*, 27 January 2009.
14. [www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainable-schools/framework/framework\\_detail.cfm](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainable-schools/framework/framework_detail.cfm)
15. DCSF, *Planning for a sustainable school*, 2008.
16. DCSF, *Planning for a sustainable school*, (2008), p.10.

If you would like further information or to comment on this briefing paper please do so by contacting ATL on [policybriefings@atl.org.uk](mailto:policybriefings@atl.org.uk)

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