EMBEDDING COMPETENCES FOR
DEMOCRATIC CULTURE IN

Education for Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

This info note explores how applying the the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can strengthen both education systems and democratic societies. By combining the democratic competences defined in the RFCDC with ESD principles, learners can be empowered to address sustainability challenges, reduce eco-anxiety, and actively participate in democratic life. It is based on a recent guidance document on RFCDC and ESD endorsed by the CDEDU at the Spring Plenary session 2025, offering practical approaches for policymakers and educators —

from curriculum development and innovative pedagogy to inclusive assessment and digital literacy — while also addressing the preparation of young people for green and socially responsible careers. Grounded in the Council of Europe's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, this initiative is part of a broader effort to renew the civic mission of education across Europe.
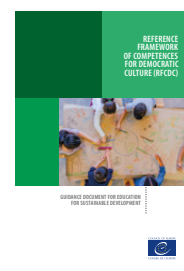
EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

ESD equips learners with the knowledge, skills, and competences needed to promote sustainability, human rights, democracy, and global citizenship. As highlighted in SDG Target 4.7, ESD fosters responsible individual and collective action to address environmental and societal challenges. The Council of Europe aligns ESD with its mission to uphold democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, emphasising the role of education in fostering sustainability, equity, and social justice.

↘ **RFCD · 2025**

Guidance document for Education for Sustainable Development

KEY MESSAGES OF THE GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

01 Empowering young people to take democratic action on environmental and sustainability issues is crucial for both influencing societal change and improving personal well-being. Linking ESD with citizenship education, particularly through the RFCDC, allows young people to engage with human rights, democracy, and cultural diversity in a meaningful way, offering significant benefits for learners' development and commitment to sustainability.

02 The RFCDC can serve as a strong foundation for ESD, aligning with other competence frameworks such as UNESCO's ESD framework, the European Commission's GreenComp, and the OECD's Global Competence framework. By developing the 20 competences outlined in the RFCDC, learners can gain the skills, values, attitudes, and critical understanding needed to address environmental and sustainability challenges. The RFCDC's focus on democratic culture further supports the integration of citizenship education into ESD, providing a comprehensive approach to fostering global-mindedness and engagement with sustainability issues.

Section 7 of the guidance document offers recommendations for education policymakers, pre-primary to secondary school educators, and non-formal educators. It covers curriculum policies, teacher training, pedagogical innovation, collaboration, assessment, and localisation. Implementing these elements will enhance education, foster civic action, and contribute to sustainability. Policymakers and educators should choose the most relevant and feasible recommendations for their contexts.

FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKERS

Prioritise RFCDC-ESD
Recognise sustainability in policies, integrate RFCDC into action plans, and collaborate for funding.

Curriculum Policy
Adapt curricula to include all RFCDC competences and integrate ESD across subjects.

Local Context
Address local sustainability issues and promote local learning.

Vulnerable Populations
Ensure accessibility for disadvantaged groups and create crisis-management plans.

Teacher Training
Include RFCDC-ESD in teacher education and support digital citizenship.

FOR EDUCATORS (PRE-PRIMARY TO SECONDARY)

Pedagogy
Use project-based and inquiry-based learning for sustainability and civic action.

Curriculum
Design interdisciplinary projects and address controversial topics.

Classroom
Foster open discussions and use technology for civic engagement.

Assessment
Align assessments with democratic values and sustainability.

Professional Development
Engage in ongoing development and collaborate with peers.

FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATORS

Lifelong Learning
Provide inclusive programmes on sustainability and democracy.

Community Engagement
Support learner-led sustainability projects.

Collaboration
Work with schools and local leaders to enhance ESD.

Advocacy
Promote ESD in policy and encourage youth involvement in decision-making.

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

Section 8 of the guidance document provides an extensive list of Council of Europe and non-Council of Europe resources. Below are a few:

↘**VOL. 1**   ↘**VOL. 2**   ↘**VOL. 3**

↘ **COUNCIL OF EUROPE · 2018**

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

↘ **COUNCIL OF EUROPE · 2022**

Guidelines for integration of RFCDC in selected subjects of national curricula

Since the publication of the three volumes of the RFCDC in 2018, further resources have been produced by the Council of Europe to support the implementation of the RFCDC in member states. Below is a selection, more can be found in the guidance document:

↘ **COUNCIL OF EUROPE · 2024**

Guidance Document for Vocational Education and Training (VET)

↘ **COUNCIL OF EUROPE · 2021**

Descriptors of Competences for Democratic Culture for Young Learners

↘ **COUNCIL OF EUROPE · 2020**

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC): Guidance Document for Higher Education

in   ↘ **www.coe.int/education**

INSPIRING EXAMPLES FROM ACROSS EUROPE

Section 6 of the guidance document explores the practical application of the RFCDC to ESD, focusing on curricular integration, pedagogies, and assessment methods.

The section highlights strategies like embedding ESD in citizenship and science education, cooperative and inquiry-based learning, outdoor activities, and teaching controversial issues. Assessment approaches include dialogue-based and project-based evaluation. Emphasising a whole-school approach, teacher training, digital literacy, and policy support, it also addresses preparing students for sustainability-focused careers. The section illustrates concepts with case examples from different initiatives (such as UNESCO Associated Schools Network, TINK@School, Messengers of Peace, "A Rounder Sense of Purpose" framework), and countries (such as Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, UK), showcasing practical implementation.

THE PROJECT AND WORKING GROUP COUNTRIES COMPOSITION

01   In 2023, the Education Department launched the initiative to apply the RFCDC to ESD, aiming to foster a culture of democracy for addressing climate change and sustainability. A key outcome is the guidance document exploring the RFCDC-ESD connection.

02   A Working Group of 20 delegates from member states and observer organisations of the CDEDU contributed by reviewing policies, sharing best practices, and shaping the guidance document.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE EDUCATION STRATEGY 2024-2030 "LEARNERS FIRST"

Part of the Council of Europe's Education Strategy 2024-2030 ("Learners First"), this initiative supports Pillar 1, "Renewing the democratic and civic mission of education", reinforcing ESD's role in citizenship education. Aligned with the Reykjavík Declaration, the guidance document promotes democratic competences—such as critical thinking and cooperation—to empower learners in addressing sustainability challenges while ensuring inclusive, quality education. The ESD initiative also contributes to the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment and accompanying Action Plan.

↘ **LEARNERS FIRST**

Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024-2030