



Education that builds resilience and solidarity in an unequal and uncertain world

Submission to the
National Conversation on Education

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Global Action Plan Ireland

www.globalactionplan.ie

Global Action Plan Ireland (GAP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Conversation on Education and the forthcoming Convention on Education 2026. This is indeed a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape an education system that prepares learners not only for examinations or employment, but for life in a complex, interconnected and rapidly changing world.

We work with people of all backgrounds, in schools, families, communities and businesses, empowering people to act for a better future.

Using the experience of our programmes in environmental education, community development and global citizenship, we offer the following reflections and recommendations. Look

Our submission is grounded in three core principles:

- Education must prepare learners for a changing world.
- Learning is lifelong and extends beyond the classroom.
- Sustainability and global citizenship are essential, not optional, components of quality education.

1. Education for a changing world

Education must equip young people not only with knowledge, but with the skills, values and sense of agency necessary to navigate uncertainty and contribute positively to society.

In an era shaped by climate change, inequality, technological transformation and increasing polarisation, narrow models of education that focus solely on content delivery and test performance are insufficient. While academic excellence remains important, schools must also cultivate:

- Critical thinking and ethical reasoning;
- Collaboration and empathy;
- Resilience and adaptability;
- Media literacy and the ability to counter disinformation;
- A strong sense of personal and collective agency.

Students should be active participants in shaping their education, not passive recipients of information. Encouraging voice, choice and collaboration builds confidence, strengthens social skills and fosters responsibility for collective action.

Education should not only ask “*What do students know?*” but also “*Who are they becoming?*”

We therefore recommend:

- Embedding ethical reflection and civic engagement across subjects.
- Ensuring that experiential and project-based learning becomes a mainstream approach rather than a peripheral activity.

Experiential learning, in particular, enables students to grapple with real-world complexity, collaborate across differences and develop skills that cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence.

2. Global Citizenship Education (GCE)

Global Citizenship Education should be woven throughout the curriculum, rather than treated as a discrete or optional subject.

Quality GCE supports learners to understand interconnected global systems, human rights, the root causes of global inequality and injustice, sustainability and the impact of individual and collective action. It nurtures empathy and a sense of shared responsibility for people and our planet.

We align with the vision articulated by the **Irish Development Education Association (IDEA)** and recommend the following systemic actions:

Policy and Funding

- Ensure every learner on the island of Ireland has access to transformative GCE;
- Increase predictable, multi-annual GCE funding to meet the international target of 3% of ODA;
- Prioritise whole-of-government policy coherence across Education, Climate, and Foreign Affairs;
- Establish a multi-stakeholder advisory group to coordinate implementation.

Quality and Research

- Promote and apply the IDEA Code of Good Practice as the benchmark for high-quality, critical GCE;
- Fund longitudinal and participatory research to evidence long-term behavioural and systemic change;
- Develop an ambitious research agenda that tracks impact across formal and non-formal settings.

Embedding in Education Systems

- Fully integrate GCE into primary and post-primary curricula, including competencies in active citizenship and climate action;

- Strengthen GCE within initial teacher education so all new teachers model critical global pedagogies;
- Expand support for GCE in youth work, adult and community education, and higher education;
- Treat GCE as an all-island priority, addressing funding gaps in Northern Ireland under the Shared Island Initiative.

GCE also has a crucial role to play in combating racism, hate speech, mis/disinformation and climate anxiety by strengthening critical thinking, media literacy and intercultural dialogue.

We recommend the integration of Global Citizenship Education across all levels of the Irish education system.

This requires equitable access, sustained funding, teacher preparation, whole-of-government coordination and evidence-based approaches to promote critical thinking, empathy and responsible civic engagement for learners of all ages.

3. Sustainability and environmental literacy

Environmental education is central to preparing future generations for the defining challenge of our time: ecological and societal sustainability.

Schools should embed climate literacy, biodiversity awareness and sustainable living practices across all subjects. Learners should understand not only the science of climate change and ecological degradation, but also the social and economic dimensions of sustainability.

Importantly, students must have opportunities to apply knowledge through meaningful action projects that positively impact their communities. Action-oriented learning builds agency and counters feelings of helplessness in the face of global challenges.

We recommend that sustainability, global citizenship and environmental education become core competencies at all levels of the education system.

4. Nature-Based and Experiential Learning

Regular outdoor and hands-on learning strengthens wellbeing, curiosity and understanding of natural systems. Nature-based education encourages a lasting connection with the living world and promotes a sense of care for, and belonging to, the natural world.

Schools should be supported to:

- Access local green spaces and community resources.
- Integrate fieldwork, gardening and biodiversity projects into everyday learning.
- Partner with community organisations to deliver experiential programmes.
- Green school grounds for nature-play

Such approaches deliver multiple benefits, including reduced stress, increased engagement, teamwork, shared responsibility and a sense of achievement through visible impact in local communities.

Nature-based education is not an “extra”; it is a powerful pedagogy that integrates science, citizenship, wellbeing and creativity. “Children who have climbed trees, rolled down hills, splashed through streams, made dens, forts, and petal perfume tend to have a deep-seated, ‘embodied’ understanding of concepts like time, space, distance, and the properties of natural materials, which is very helpful if they eventually choose to become mathematicians, scientist and engineers.” (Palmer 2016)

Nature-based learning also strongly supports the attainment of ESD core objectives. Playful inquiry in nature nourishes curiosity, collaborative problem-solving and systems thinking and allows children to develop an understanding of complex ideas such as interdependence through observation of the natural world and connection with nature and one another. It also nourishes core values of empathy, care for living things and emotional connection. Frequent learning experiences in nature support the development of a strong foundation upon which children can develop a deeper understanding of natural life systems and how human behaviour impacts them, encouraging them to take a position of care and ultimately build a better future. “If we want children to flourish, to be truly empowered, we must first allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it” (David Sobel, 1996)

We recommend embedding nature-based and experiential learning across the curriculum, by supporting schools to access green spaces, integrate hands-on environmental projects, and partner with experienced forest school and nature education practitioners.

5. Lifelong Learning and Community Connection

Learning does not stop at the school gate. When adults and communities have opportunities to learn, they grow in confidence, curiosity and adaptability. Lifelong learning strengthens critical thinking, problem-solving and civic participation across generations.

Education policy should therefore:

- Strengthen links between schools, families and community organisations;
- Support adult and community education initiatives that reinforce sustainability and citizenship;
- Recognise youth work and non-formal education as integral parts of the learning ecosystem.

When families and communities are engaged in learning about the world and their local contexts, children's education is reinforced and enriched. This whole-community approach builds resilience and shared responsibility.

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By embracing lifelong learning and community connection, Ireland can cultivate an education system where curiosity, responsibility and active citizenship are nurtured across generations, ensuring that learning truly is a shared, lifelong journey.

We recommend:

- Funding and supporting community gardens to run after-school programmes for children and families, creating opportunities for intergenerational learning and practical skills development.
- Supporting after-school forest school groups on school grounds and local green spaces, integrating nature-based learning into everyday life for children and adults alike.
- Building closer, sustained links between families, community organisations and schools, including NGOs, youth services and adult education providers, to create a coherent ecosystem of learning beyond the classroom.

- Recognising and resourcing non-formal education, youth work and community-led learning initiatives as essential partners in fostering civic engagement, sustainability literacy and social cohesion.

6. Supporting educators

Teachers are central to meaningful educational reform. To embed sustainability, global citizenship and experiential learning effectively, educators require:

- High-quality initial teacher education in GCE, Nature-based learning, and sustainability;
- Ongoing professional development opportunities;
- Access to practical resources and community partnerships;
- Time and institutional support for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Reform will only succeed if teachers are empowered, trusted and supported as professionals and change-makers. A system that prioritises their development, wellbeing and agency will directly benefit learners and communities alike.

Investing in educators ensures that the transformative potential of experiential, sustainability-focused, and community-connected education is fully realised.

We recommend:

- Embedding quality nature-based pedagogy across all initial teacher training programmes.
- Supporting teachers to share and scale successful sustainability and GCE initiatives through networks such as the Irish School Sustainability Network.
- Recognising and resourcing teacher-led projects and collaborative learning as a core part of the education ecosystem, not optional extras.

Conclusion: An education system that builds resilience and solidarity in an uncertain world

The Convention on Education presents a unique opportunity to align Ireland's education system with the realities of the 21st century.

At GAP, we aspire to an education system that:

- Develops knowledgeable, critical and compassionate citizens;
- Embeds sustainability and global citizenship at its core;
- Values experiential and nature-based learning;
- Connects schools with families and communities;
- Equips learners not just to succeed individually, but to contribute responsibly to society.

Education should empower young people not only to understand the world as it is, but to imagine, and help build, a better one.

GAP Ireland stands ready to support this vision, using the experience of our programmes and partnerships to help shape an education system that empowers people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to act for a better future.



Making Space for Change

Global Action Plan CLG.
Axis Ballymun, Main Street, Ballymun, Dublin D09 Y9W0.

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