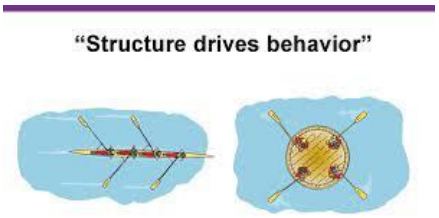
ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY AND SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE
San Mateo County Office of Education

Overview to District-Wide Sustainability Committees in TK-12 Education

Last Updated March 2022

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Environmental sustainability and climate resiliency efforts in schools (i.e. carbon-neutral energy, zero waste, living schoolyards, etc.) are a win-win-win situation. It's the right thing to do for the budget, the buildings, and the students. It contributes to positive academic outcomes and it improves the overall school climate. These efforts are also critical components of a holistic approach to equity, as the outcomes of a sustainability initiative contribute directly to providing all students safe and healthy opportunities to play and learn. Investing in environmental education and sustainable campuses also provides equitable access to college and career pathways that align with the growing emphasis that business, government, and higher education sectors have placed on sustainability.



Often the most difficult part of sustainability efforts or "going green" is changing institutional culture and building a structure that drives sustainability efforts. In order to prioritize sustainability and climate resiliency, it is critical that school communities create a structure that drives the behavior of ongoing prioritization of sustainable and climate ready schools efforts. Like all organization-wide efforts, successful sustainability initiatives require a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, an organizational structure that fosters communication, empowerment, and accountability, knowledgeable and skilled leaders, and adequate resources to meet goals. Sustainability committees (a.k.a. "Green" or "Climate Action" Committees) can provide an important structure for prioritizing and building momentum towards sustainable outcomes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEES

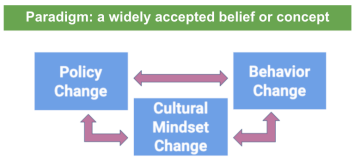
Successful sustainability committees will generally have the following characteristics:

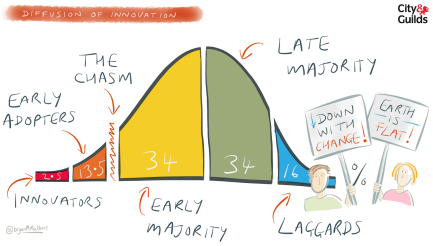
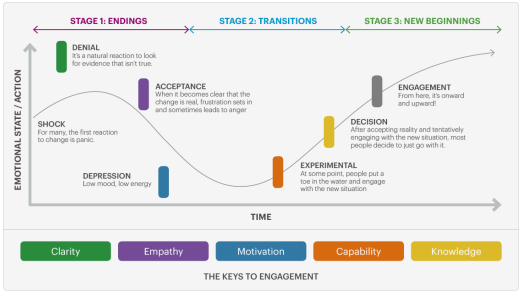
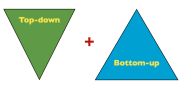
- Buy-in and Participation: Participation (or representation) should come from individuals, departments, each site, and the greater community, and is best when across multiple stakeholder groups (students, teachers, staff, administrators, community members, etc.).
- Frequent and Regular Touch Points: Meetings should be on a regular basis - example cadences include: bi-monthly, monthly, every two months, quarterly, etc.
- Shared Goals and Actionable Outcomes: The committee should establish shared goals, and then set-up a process or structure for working towards achieving those shared goals (working groups, action teams, sub-committees, etc.).

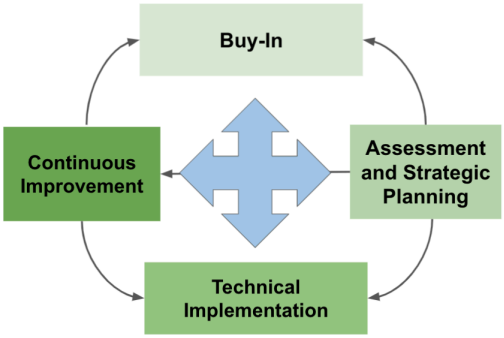
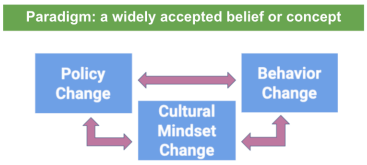
These committees/task forces can be formed at the school site level; however, in school communities that take place across a larger nested organizational structure (i.e. public school district, charter network, catholic schools diocese, etc.), it is recommended that district/network-wide committees forces be formed in order to ensure equitable outcomes. *It is worth noting that the most long-lasting efforts will be through a long-term committee as opposed to an ad hoc committee or a task force, which are generally more short-term in nature. However, it might be that the work starts with a task force, and evolves into a long-standing committee.*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMITTEES THAT BRING CHANGE TO THE STATUS QUO

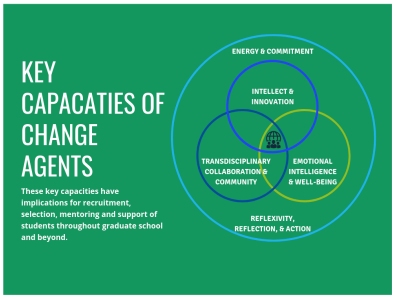
Launching a sustainability initiative means bringing transformative change into the school community. By nature sustainability initiatives encourage "paradigm shifting change" as they require attention to cultural mindset, behavior change, and are most effective when they also include the support of policy. Successful implementation of a sustainability committee can benefit from considering multiple change theories (learn more about the change theories below and in the *Change Theory for Solutionaries Overview*).



Change Theory	Consideration for Sustainability Committee
Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory  **Developed by E.M. Rogers in 1962**	When bringing a new committee to a community, it is important to think about how that will be received across the community. The Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory, can provide a good reference point for understanding how much the idea of needing to respond to the environmental crisis or climate change has diffused in general across the community. For example, community organizers might ask, *"Is there widespread consensus about this - meaning that the early majority (or even late majority) believes that a response is needed? Or are the people who believe this still just "innovators and early adopters"?"* In order for a new idea to stick, changemakers need to get the early majority to engage. A sustainability committee is a structure that people in the community can participate in that will help build the number of early adopters towards an early majority. The committee can create even more opportunities for engagement across the community, helping diffuse the behavioral change of prioritizing sustainability even further.
Kubler-Ross Change Curve  **Developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in 1969** Adapted by many including Moss Warner (2017)	The Kubler-Ross Change Curve can be used to understand individuals' emotional readiness for change related to environmental sustainability and climate resiliency. With this knowledge, leaders can better identify the right messaging and goals to help people participate in the sustainability committee, or the right message to get decision makers to authorize a sustainability committee. The Moss Warner adaptation of the change curve provides a helpful framework for considering how to approach people at different stages of the curve.
Top Down and Bottom Up (Grass Roots) Leadership  	Setting up a sustainability committee takes leadership from the top and bottom, but that will look different in different communities. For example, a committee might be started by bottom-up grassroots efforts (students, teachers, staff, parents, etc.) and leadership at the top may join after there is already momentum and buy-in. In other cases, top-level leadership may drive the goal to have a committee and search for grassroots support.

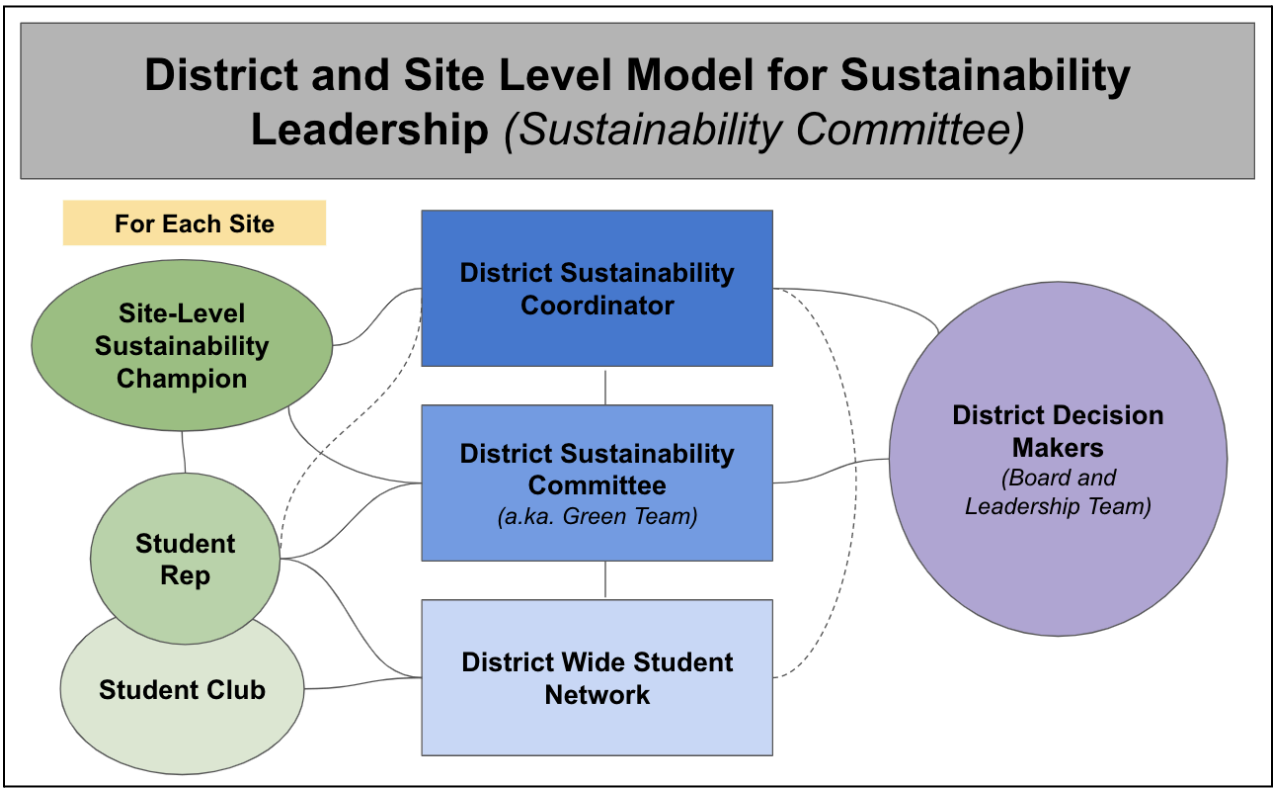
Mild, Medium, or Spicy: Considering Speed and Intensity 	When forming a sustainability committee, it may help to understand the speed and intensity that community members want to approach the work with. If there is little direction from leadership and limited grassroots engagement, the community may lean towards a “mild” approach with low-level, incremental changes over a long period of time. In establishing a sustainability committee and maintaining momentum, leaders should aim for a “spicy” approach in which there are strong grassroots efforts as well as strong commitment and direction from leadership.
Phases of Change 	As leaders are setting up a sustainability committee, they will start in the buy-in phase: gathering stakeholders to participate and show that a significant amount of community members care about sustainability. During the assessment phase, the committee can analyze the status of sustainability initiatives in their school district and create strategic sustainability goals. In the technical implementation phase, the goals will be implemented - these might include plans for zero-waste facilities, disaster preparedness, environmental curriculum, etc. In the continuous improvement phase, the committee will meet regularly to share updates on the sustainability goal implementation (serving as an important accountability mechanism) and to create new goals as circumstances evolve.
Change Curve Monster **Developed by Jeanie Duck in 2002**	The decision to make change happen after a period of stagnation is usually led by a small group of people. Gathering stakeholders to form a sustainability committee is a first step toward preparation. As the committee gains participants and forms a vision and strategy, they will move from preparation towards implementation, moving up the ‘hill’ of taking action steps towards change. As the committee begins to take action, certain percentages of the community will have their emotions and fears about change triggered (i.e. the “change monster”), including district leadership. By predicting and mitigating this “monster”, leaders can get through these clashes, conflicts, and failures, and the end result - getting sustainability consistently prioritized through the committee - will come to fruition!
Levers for Changing Paradigms  *The concepts outlined here came from Andra Yeghoian working with Climate Corps Fellows in 2019-20 to develop a framework for designing Community Impact Projects.*	Sustainability committees are a way to implement behavior change in the community, which may have already experienced some degree of policy and cultural mindset change. Policy changes may include school board climate emergency resolutions, zero-waste policies, or other green policies. Cultural mindset changes may have occurred through different sustainability training programs across the district, or exposure to environmental issues via popular culture or other personal connections. The sustainability committees provide a critical lever for behavioral change that is currently missing. The committee can hold community members accountable to action on relevant sustainability goals, and provide others with the opportunity to participate in regular, sustained action.

Characteristics of Change Agents	Understanding the characteristics of a change agent can help student leaders understand to what extent they identify with this word and this work. Being a change agent means standing up to broken systems and using your voice to speak truth to those in power. Doing the change agent work of setting up a sustainability committee is an important responsibility that will leave a lasting legacy on school communities and is highly respected in the academic and professional worlds. It also provides students with the opportunity to connect with like minded peers from all across the county and make meaningful friendships in a community they have chosen to join.



SHARED AND INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP MODELS FOR SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEES

In order to get started with organizing an organizational-wide sustainability committee, it requires establishing structures and pathways for organizing groups of dedicated school stakeholders - *administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community-based partners*. The graphic below (see close-up version here) shows a model for site level leadership that includes students and faculty/staff, and shows how that site level leadership will contribute to a larger district-wide sustainability leadership team. The image depicts the relationships and networks visually with lines that represent communication channels and connections (note that dashed lines represent that a district coordinator may or may not have a direct responsibility for student programs).



The table on the next page provides detail on responsibilities of each stakeholder group in the model, as well as outlines communication and decision making pathways between stakeholders and groups. *It should be noted that in order to reach equitable outcomes across the district, each site should have a champion, and pathways for student leadership.*

Explanation of Roles and Responsibilities for District-Wide Leadership Model

Role or Group	Overview and Responsibilities	Communication and Decision-Making	Time
District Decision Makers	This group is based on already existing decision making structures such as the board of education, and/or a district leadership team.	This group communicates directly with the District Sustainability Coordinator and has committee representatives.	Varies by leadership group
District Sustainability Coordinator	The District Sustainability Coordinator is responsible for developing and implementing the district-wide sustainability strategic plan, as well as convening the District Sustainability Committee. This role could be part of an already existing position (i.e. Health and Wellness Coordinator, Science TOSA/Coordinator, Equity Coordinator), or the district might consider partnerships such as Climate Corps Fellows. *See Sample Job Description*	This role acts as a liaison between the site-level leadership groups and the district leadership and supports implementation.	20-100% FTE
District Sustainability Committee	This group is convened monthly by the District Sustainability Coordinator (or if there is no coordinator by a district lead) and is composed of the site-level Sustainability Champions, district stakeholders, and Student Sustainability Club Reps. Monthly meetings will focus on strategic planning, sharing best practices, problem-solving, and work towards collective goals.	This group serves as an advisory and action based group that helps identify goals and strategies, and supports implementation of projects.	Monthly
District-wide Student Network	This student network is open to all students across the district who are interested in environmental leadership. This network is focused on expanding communication between student clubs and other student leaders, building knowledge and skills, sharing best practices, and promoting collective action.	The network will be co-facilitated by the District Sustainability Coordinator and Sustainability Club Presidents.	1-2 summits per year
Site-Level Sustainability Champions or Facilitators	Each site-level Sustainability Champion (see *sample job description here*) is responsible for providing coordination and oversight of site-level sustainability efforts, as well as contributing to district-wide efforts *See Sample Job Description*	This role acts as a liaison between the District Sustainability Coordinator and site stakeholders (principal, student leaders, parents, and community partners).	4-6 Hours Per Week
Site-Level Student Sustainability Club	This group selects projects and initiatives to focus on each year and works with the Site-Level Sustainability Champion on planning and implementing campus greening projects that drive infrastructure changes, policy, behavior change, and cultural awareness. *In K-8 Districts this leadership team may only be at the middle school level; however, it is encouraged that K-5 schools develop student leadership pathways.*	This group works with the Site-Level Sustainability Champion to implement projects effectively.	Weekly or 2x per month
Sustainability Club Rep (President)	This student leader is selected by the Student Sustainability Club, and has the responsibility of planning meeting agendas, taking the lead on project plans, and representing the site at district and network meetings.	This leader works with the Site-Level Sustainability Champion and represents the club at district-wide meetings.	2-3 Hours Per Week

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPENSATION AND TRAINING

In order to keep sustainability initiatives and committees going in the long-term, it is highly recommended that districts leaders take into account the following considerations:

- **Stipends and Tenure**: Because site-level sustainability champions are faculty and staff with other full-time responsibilities within the school, their role requires a stipend and/or an extra prep period. In order to ensure equity of access to leadership pathways, tenure for Champions may need to rotate (i.e. 1-3 year cycles).
- **Growth of Leadership Pathways:** As sustainable and resilient programs and efforts grow, it may be necessary to consider multiple champions that focus on different aspects of whole school sustainability integration (e.g., Curriculum Champion, Campus and Operations Champion, and Community/Culture Champion).
- **Professional Learning for Leaders**: In order to provide Sustainability Champions with foundational and functional knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in the role, they will need access to ongoing professional development. This can be provided in partnership with the County Office of Education or other community-based partner organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FIRST ACTIONS BY SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEES

A typical challenge to launching initiatives and committees is being unsure how to get the work started. It is recommended that sustainability committees get started with assessing and planning, as these two processes will help solidify key leaders within the community for this leadership model, as well as establish buy-in for implementation of goals and strategies. An overview to both strategies is below:

- **Baseline Assessment:** Early in the formation of district-wide sustainability work, it is recommended that the district conduct a baseline assessment focused around identifying the current progress on sustainable and climate resilient schools. This process will help identify progress to date, and will surface gaps in access and equity. It is highly recommended that the process include opportunities for sharing challenges and opportunities at each site, and that the current status be documented in a place that everyone has access.
- **Strategic Planning:** After conducting a baseline assessment, sustainability committees will have the information they need to work on a comprehensive strategic planning process that includes identifying a shared vision of sustainability, and outlining goals and strategies for implementing a robust sustainable and climate resilient schools transformation process.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Resources

- San Mateo County Sustainability Committee Case Studies - Stories from the field of successes and challenges in launching district-wide sustainability committees.
- Sample K-12 Sustainability Vision and Goals
    - Sustainability Committee Activity: Vision and Goals Activity Template
- Change Theory for Solutionaries
- Job Descriptions for District and Site Sustainability Champions:
    - District Sustainability Champion
    - Site Sustainability Champions

References

- A Practical Guide to Hiring a Sustainability Professional for Universities and Colleges
- Sustainability Roadmaps for Hospitals
- NYC DOE Sustainability Efforts and 2018-19 Annual Report
- Jacksonville Florida Green Champions Program
- Detroit's Americorps Green Schools Coordinator
- Building Effective School Environmental Clubs
- Teacher Leadership: Guide to Creating Teacher Leader Positions and Getting the Most out of Stipends
- Why Corporate America is Making Room in the C-Suite for Sustainability - This 5 min Marketplace news story from May 2021, explains that sustainability coordinators and offices are really about managing complex change that is at the intersection of environment, social justice, and economics. The story also goes on to say that sustainability officers are a “must have, not a might have”. Implications for schools might be the need to figure out how to staff these positions, and also the need to prepare students to step into this as a future career.