

Environmental Criteria and Certification of Educational Establishments in Finland



Schools and educational establishments have an important mission in supporting the growth of their students as environmentally responsible and skilled citizens who are able to consider the aspects of sustainable development in their work and everyday lives. To help educational establishments in this challenging task, environmental criteria and a certification system have been elaborated in the Life Environment project *Envedu* (2001-2004), which received financial support from the European Commission and the Finnish Ministry of the Environment. The participants in the project were the Trade Union of Education in Finland, the OKKA Foundation, National Board of Education, Hyvinkää-Riihimäki Vocational Adult Education Centre, University of Oulu, University of Joensuu and Cooperative Eco-One.

The criteria can be applied to the general and vocational education at the first and secondary level. A project of developing criteria for higher education (polytechnics) has also started. The use of the criteria and the certification are voluntary. They have been created as tools and incentives for the development of operation and quality of teaching. The criteria set a standard for environmental performance of an exemplary level. To reach the level of the criteria requires several years of systematic work, but an educational establishment can also use the criteria as a development tool without any intention of applying for the certificate.

The Environmental Criteria focus on the ecological aspect of sustainable development, i.e., environmental responsibility, but in 2007-2008 they will be extended to cover also the economic, social and cultural aspects. The criteria contain three entities, which are: 1. Planning, organising and development of environmental issues, 2. Teaching and learning, and 3. Maintenance activities. Before a school can apply for the Environmental Certificate, it has to carry out a self-assessment. Furthermore, an independent, external auditor evaluates the self-assessment report and carries out an audit in the school. The auditor verifies that the school fulfils the Environmental Criteria, and gives the school feedback on its strengths and needs of improvement.

The school applies for the Environmental Certificate from the OKKA Foundation. The certificate is free of charge, but the school compensates the auditor for the costs due to the planning and implementation of the external audit. The certificate is valid for a three-year period at a time. Teachers and environmental professionals are trained as external auditors on specific training courses.

The environmental work in a school is based on continuous improvement, which clarifies and improves other activities of the school as well. The aim is to take into account the environmental aspect in all activities in the school, including teaching and everyday actions. The *environmental management system (EMS)* is a tool to manage and develop environmental matters in the school. It helps the school to achieve the performance level required by the Environmental Criteria for Educational Establishments. The criteria can also be used in constructing the EMS. In Finland, teacher training courses are organized to support the construction of EMS.

The OKKA Foundation is responsible for maintaining and developing of the certification system. It also provides guidance to educational establishments with regard to the certification and the use of the criteria. More information and material can be found on the web-page of the certification system

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