

Dancing Towards a Greener Future: The Earth Charter School Seal at Escuela Julián E. Blanco, Puerto Rico



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“EDUCATION BEATS AT THE
HEART OF SUSTAINABILITY.”

Andrea Illy



OUR PLANET IS IN DANGER

As the Earth's system is rapidly changing, experts have been calling for an urgent need to change humanity's way of action. Humans must learn how to live on the planet sustainably to ensure our survival. Achieving the transition to global sustainability is a huge challenge, which requires empowering everyone with knowledge, competencies, and values to move towards a sustainable future. With this transition in mind, The United Nations created Sustainable Development Goal 4, highlighting the importance of Quality Education: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Educational institutions heavily influence how we make sense of situations and perceive our surroundings. They influence our values and ethical principles. Because of that, education is considered to be a driving force in the achievement of all SDGs.

That is reflected in SDG 4 Quality Education Target 4.7: *"By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development"*.

In alignment with these goals, Earth Charter International created the Earth & ESD School Seal (ECSS). This pioneering quality seal school assessment integrates an ethical perspective of sustainability with the pedagogical elements and practices associated with education for sustainable development [for more information, visit our website, earthcharter.org].

This is the story of how Escuela Especializada en Ballet Julián E. Blanco (EJEB) uses the Earth Charter School Seal (ECSS) to improve its sustainability and involve the whole school community in that process.

School Profile

Name: Escuela Especializada en Ballet Julián E. Blanco

Location: San Juan, Puerto Rico

School type: State School, Ballet Specialization

School level: Secondary

Number of Students: 120

Number of Teachers: 18

Prior engagement in sustainable initiatives: Eco-School Green Flag (since 2011)

Prior Engagement with the Earth Charter: Earth Charter is used as a living document in the classroom and shared amongst school community on a regular basis

INTRODUCTION

Escuela Julián E. Blanco (EJEB) is a unique ballet school for secondary pupils, integrating ballet lessons alongside the regular academic curriculum. This dual focus demands a more holistic approach than typical schools, providing EJEB with a solid foundation to implement the Earth Charter School Seal (ECSS) on a whole-school scale. In 2023, EJEB decided to adopt the ECSS, and by early 2024, they had successfully compiled and submitted their portfolio, receiving certification.

BACKGROUND AND INITIATION OF ECSS

EJEB's journey with the Earth Charter (EC) began with Minnette Rodriguez, an upper-level science teacher who incorporated EC principles into her curriculum after exploring them during her master's degree. Since 2010, Rodriguez has embedded these principles into her teaching philosophy. Adopting the ECSS seal was a starting point for other EJEB teachers to include the EC principles in their curriculums and to use them to show their pupils the connection of the school's subjects to sustainability and ethical values.





EJEB has a longstanding commitment to sustainable initiatives. Next to the implementation of EC, the school received the Eco-Schools Green Flag in 2011. Some principles of the EC were already embedded in EJEB when the seal implementation started. Rodriguez reflects, “There was already a culture of care, a culture of love for nature, so without realizing it, we were already working with the principles of the Earth Charter.” However, the school was missing an update on their sustainable initiatives and making them more concrete. When Alicia Jiménez, Director of Programmes at Earth Charter International, approached EJEB and asked for their interest in the seal, it was a warmly welcomed opportunity.

Rodriguez gathered the faculty and started reflecting on some questions: What is the school missing regarding sustainability? What can be done in the future? Finally, they decided that ECSS would be a great initiative for their school to go one step further, and the ECSS process started.

FORMATION OF THE SEAL COMMITTEE

The first step in the implementation of ECSS was the creation of a seal's committee. This committee included the principal, six 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students, and several teachers. The committee held dialogues to understand the content and meaning of ECSS and then informed the rest of the faculty about their objectives. The committee met almost weekly to discuss progress, plan activities, and ensure that the EC principles were integrated across all subjects and school activities. All committee members got access to the ECSS resources via TEAMS. The design software Canva was used to create a shared document to collect the evidence for the indicators, making building the portfolio a collaborative effort. While all committee members knew about the seal from their meetings and the resources, the pupils learned about it in their classes. The committee's teachers discussed the seal with their colleagues, trying to include everyone in the school community.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The Earth Charter has become a living document within EJE and is integrated into daily classroom activities and beyond. Rodriguez elaborates: "They use it daily. And I believe their training in the classroom, in the different subjects, enables them to be spokespersons [on the subject of the EC]."





In her science classes, the topics are connected with environmental sustainability. This approach supports teaching scientific principles but also instills a sense of responsibility and care for the community of life. The ECSS committee strives to embed a culture of sustainability within the entire school community, ensuring it is perceived as a natural and integral part of their education rather than an additional task. Melissa Vázquez Ortiz, a Spanish teacher, integrates the EC principles into her lessons. At this moment, she follows up on what the pupils have learned in their sciences class about the EC and builds upon that knowledge in her subject, facilitating an interdisciplinary approach. The teacher uses the EC principles as a lens to examine Spanish literature, contextualizing it with contemporary issues. She states, “From my point of view, I integrate the EC by giving a new purpose to what I have taught. As a new lens of how to examine it, but in the light of those indicators, those pillars, those principles of the Earth Charter.” This approach helps students make connections between their studies and the real world, enhancing their critical thinking skills and deepening their understanding of the material.



In addition to classroom activities, the school participates in events and projects where the students advocate for the EC principles, recently at Yunque, a Puerto Rican National Park.

The broader community of EJEB is actively involved in the seal adoption process through classroom initiatives like daily reflections using the EC. The committee's efforts aim to influence the school's internal culture with the ECSS.

EC-REFLECTIONS TO PROMOTE SELF-AWARENESS AND CRITICAL THINKING

Reflective practices are a core component of EJEB's educational strategy. The ECSS framework promotes self-awareness and critical thinking among students by encouraging them to reflect on their actions and environmental impact.

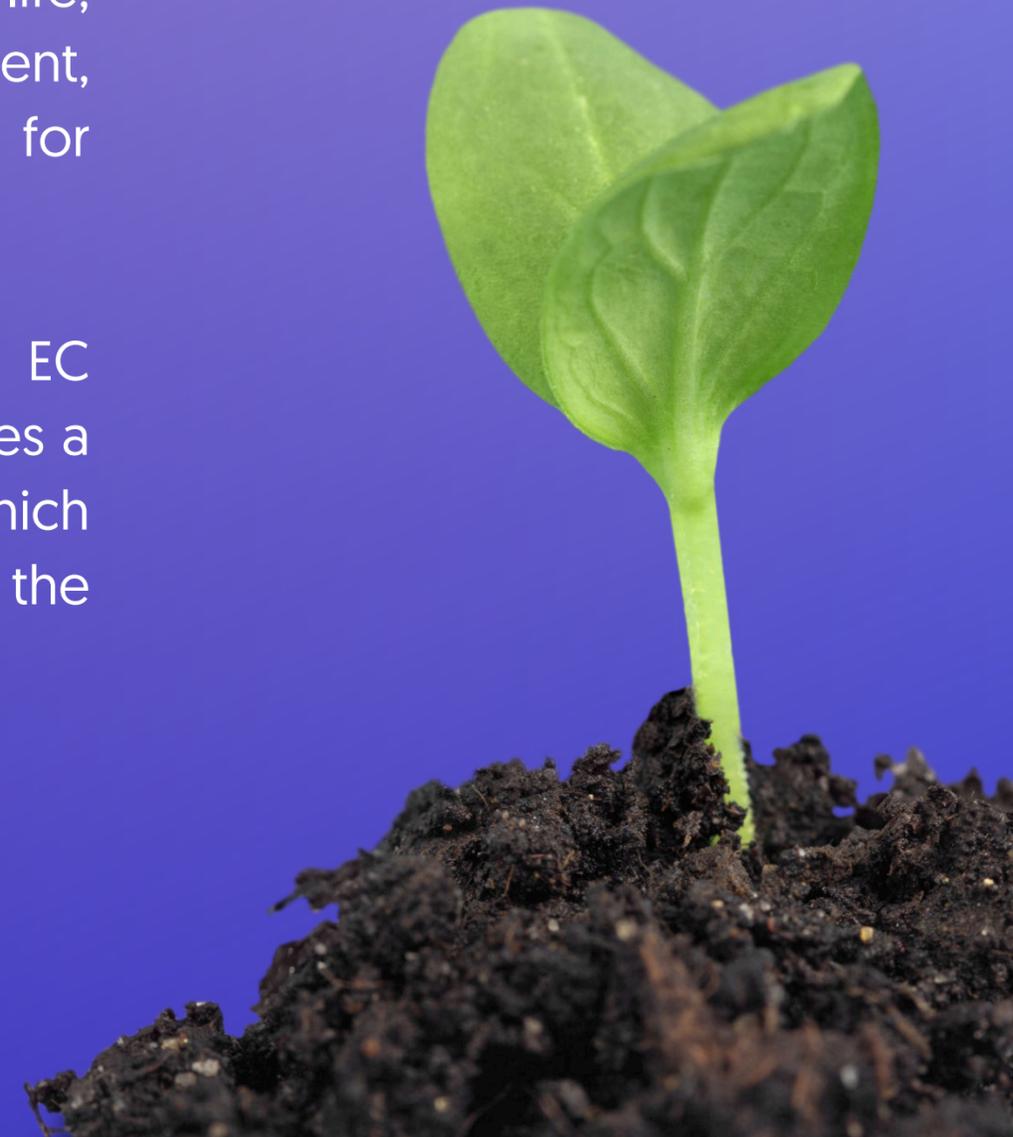
Regular reflection sessions in classrooms prompt students to discuss their experiences and contributions to sustainability initiatives. These discussions help students internalize the principles of the EC and understand their role in promoting a sustainable future.

Rodriguez uses the EC principles as a tool for their class reflections: "I always like to start the class with a reflection. Some teachers and others are already starting to do the same. So, to create that they are aware has been encouraged. That part of being aware of the process, of owning the educational and environmental process." Her students enjoy the reflections and remind her when she forgets about the EC in their curriculum: "It is already natural to use the Earth Charter and every time I hear a student, because sometimes I forget, for example, to write something about the Earth Charter, some principle, and one reminds me as if it were a reflex."

CULTIVATING A SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH A HOLISTIC APPROACH

EJEB's holistic approach to education integrates sustainability into all aspects of school life, creating a sustainable school culture. School management's support, parental engagement, people beyond the campus, and interdisciplinary collaboration lay the foundation for substantial impact and long-term change.

School community members who were not involved in the ECSS process or other EC initiatives can read about the progress in their magazine, Utopia, in which EJEB dedicates a section to their EC actions. The magazine is also read by people outside the campus, which indicates the impact of their actions and supports their holistic approach. Moreover, the school also shares news on its social media.





OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Implementing the ECSS framework at EJEB was not without its challenges. Initially, some faculty members were resistant to the changes and additional responsibilities. Collaborative planning helped alleviate concerns and build a shared purpose among the staff.

IMPACT ON THE STUDENTS

Implementing the ECSS framework has profoundly impacted EJEB, transforming the school culture and the educational experiences of students and staff. Teachers notice an increased interest in science. Many students are mainly interested in ballet, but integrating the sustainable and ethical principles of the EC in their curriculum has sparked a new interest in sciences. Furthermore, they state that they should observe how students act more consciously and sustainably by picking up trash on the floors they previously would have left. Another major benefit of the seal is that it supports the students in their leadership skills. They learn about the EC at school and later educate others about it.

Rodriguez says, "An important impact has been on building leadership. I think that has been the greatest reward. "Integrating sustainability principles has enriched academic learning, connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world applications. This approach has improved students' critical thinking skills and academic performance.

EJEB'S JOURNEY

EJEB's journey with the ECSS framework exemplifies the transformative power of sustainable education. EJEB has created a dynamic and engaging learning environment that empowers students to become conscientious global citizens by integrating the Earth Charter principles into their curriculum and school culture.

Through dedication, collaboration, and a commitment to sustainability, EJEB has shown that the ECSS framework can be effectively integrated into a school's existing structure, enhancing students' academic and personal development.

WHY WOULD EJEB BE INTERESTED IN THE ECSS IF THEY ALREADY ARE A CERTIFIED ECO SCHOOL AND HAD PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THE EC?

Although the school had already implemented EC principles, the seal adoption was the starting point of the whole school community's involvement. And only with the involvement of the wider community, sustainable development in educational institutions can be achieved. The ECSS provided additional perspectives on their sustainability practice, that complemented what they were doing as an Eco School. This perspective includes the understanding of the why being sustainable and the underpinning values and ethical principles that are the foundation of sustainability.



Would you like to elevate sustainability and transform your school into a place where **SUSTAINABILITY** and **ETHICAL VALUES** matter?

Visit our webpage earthcharter.org for more information or contact us directly at info@earthcharter.org

We look forward to starting the journey and creating a more sustainable planet together with you!