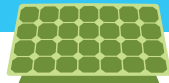
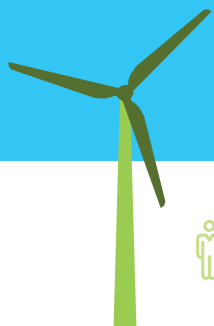


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SAMPLE



# LEADERSHIP for SUSTAINABILITY



SAVING THE PLANET  
ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME



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# Introduction

I meant no harm. I most truly did not.

But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.

I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.

I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads

*The Lorax* by Dr Seuss (1971, p. 39)

When I relinquished primary school headship after leading two schools (three if you count an amalgamation) over 20 years, it was tempting to think that I deserved to sit back, potter in the garden and do some part-time school improvement consultancy to pay for extended out-of-season holidays. I am after all a middle class 'Baby Boomer' (those born between 1946 and 1964) who, like some of my peers had it all in terms of home-ownership, relatively high disposable income and index-linked pension. Wasn't I therefore 'entitled' to an easier life after a stressful time in schools situated in very challenging circumstances?

The key to why I chose to sweat over a hot laptop to produce this book can be found in the realisation that I'm entitled to nothing. Why? Because my life to date has likely taken much more out of planet Earth's biosphere than has been replenished. This is starkly illustrated by 'Earth Overshoot Day' which in 2021 was July 29th.<sup>1</sup> This marks the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year.

I think of my numerous foreign holidays by plane and the hundreds of thousands of miles I've driven. This is compounded by my consumption of processed food with high carbon and water footprints, living in energy-thirsty houses and lazily using cheap products procured from ethically dubious sources. I also wince about the amount of one-use plastic I've used and how many cheap electronic devices and articles of clothing I've discarded without

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<sup>1</sup> To determine the date of Earth Overshoot Day, Global Footprint Network combine environmental data from many sources to assess humanity's resource situation. See <https://www.overshootday.org/>.

thought of how they were manufactured and disposed of. All this is nothing compared to having two children brought up in one of the most prosperous areas of the world and requiring vast planetary resources.<sup>2</sup> I've also benefited from countless outdoor pursuits and aesthetic pleasures derived from the natural world, with some like skiing causing much damage.<sup>3</sup>

I'm as guilty of obliviousness, self-justification, obfuscation and denial<sup>4</sup> of my personal responsibilities towards our planet as the next person. Like many, I've also put environmental concerns into a box marked 'To Be Dealt With Later' while carrying on regardless. I'm one of the people benefitting from a WEIRD society – Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (Henrich, 2020) – that instigated Enlightenment thinking, selfish individualism and associated superiority complex.<sup>5</sup> Like many others in 'developed' nations, I've felt a misplaced feeling of entitlement to my spoils as if this was the natural way of things.

Having had a background in environmental education, I was aware earlier than most of today's headline 'environmental problems'. This led me to put sustainability increasingly at the heart of my work, while endeavouring to pursue a 'low impact' lifestyle. But, as you can see from my past accumulation of overconsumption, I'm not preaching from an ivory tower of smug virtue. I sometimes did my best, but hindsight has shown me that it wasn't good enough. Suddenly the distant deadlines for action of my youth have come uncomfortably close, along with a sinking feeling that some have passed. So, it's all too apparent that the social and economic activities which are depleting planetary resources at an alarming rate need to change course as we enter the uncertainties of the geological Anthropocene epoch. This shows

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2 On average in developed nations having a child creates 58.6 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year and meat eating 800Kg of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year.

See <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541> for other things we do which cause high emissions.

3 See Ski Resorts and Their Impact on the Environment ([treehugger.com](http://treehugger.com))

4 Denial is a fascinating area of psychology. To illustrate this in relation to this subject matter, see the account of a community whose glacier was rapidly melting but who still didn't want to address climate change in Kari Marie Norgaard's book *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions & Everyday Life*.

5 The Enlightenment (sometimes referred to as The Age of Reason) emerged in the late 17th century in Europe and is the basis for the rapid developments in science, technology, economics and industry that have delivered the many material benefits we see today. The 'rational' thinking and belief in 'objective facts' behind it also increased the questioning of long-held religious and other traditional cultural beliefs, including how societies should be run. New artistic forms also emerged during this time, both because of it and as a reaction against it, such as Romanticism and the Arts & Crafts movement. Its 'modernist' philosophy promoted the notion of continual linear 'progress', and this greatly accelerated unsustainable human existence by magnifying our exploitative tendencies and the rift between ourselves and the natural world. It made many of us forget that we are part of this finite and precious world.



that, like asteroid strikes and volcanic eruptions, humans are radically and detrimentally changing the bio-chemical make-up of the planet.<sup>6</sup>

Another strong motivation for writing this book is raw fear – and this has been enhanced by having a young daughter who is now 6 years old and might well be alive at the end of the century. Way before this, by the time she’s an adult, environmental tipping points may well have been reached (some say they already have) and I literally fear for her life and those of her generation, let alone those coming later. She may inherit some material advantage from my estate, but this will literally be worth nothing if our civilisation crumbles due to the biosphere being finally unable to bear the burdens human beings place upon it.

Despite mending many of my damaging ways, I still owe the planet a substantial debt. So, if you see this book as a guilt trip, then I suppose it is. At least I’m not in denial!

## Simple Arithmetic

Saving the planet one school at a time might seem an extravagant claim. But imagine if every school *really* was a sustainable school in the widest sense, as outlined in Chapter 1. The difference this would make to education and wider society would be inestimable – although let’s try. My calculation goes as follows: one sustainable school head teacher/principal with a school roll of, say, 500 with 50 staff would not only have the potential to influence those 550 individuals, but also their families, extended families and friends, which could take the figure up to several thousand. If the school had a high profile in this field, with the way social media works, this could virally reach many more, perhaps tens of thousands. If 24,300 schools in England did the same, through ‘six degrees of separation’, we’re talking about a reach of millions across the country and beyond.

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6 National Geographic (2019) says that ‘the current epoch is called the Holocene, which began 11,700 years ago after the last major ice age. However, the Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems.’ It should be noted that not all humans are culpable; there are still many billions who live within planetary limits (unfortunately many in abject poverty due to exploitation and/or neglect). Environmentalists say we should aim to create the ‘Eocene’, an epoch where we live in harmony with the planet.

But who are the planet-savers needed to lead sustainable schools? In Chapter 2, I characterise Leaders for Sustainability as guardians of the long-term future who can inspire others to be the same by providing opportunities for co-creating new solutions. They model types of thinking and behaviour which encourages everyone in the school to unleash their minds to avoid blind acceptance of what is 'normal' (much of the present normal being a planet-wrecker). These leaders are upbeat and solution-focused through holistic means, offering a bright future for everyone. They have a strong moral compass, being values led, and display high levels of empathy and courage. Above all they are 'authentic', rather than mass-produced cardboard cut-outs. These leaders think out of the box, while recognising that the box in the form of the present education sector, can't be ignored. They break away from unnecessary conformity and subtly 'game the system' for the benefit of all. It's all about wanting everyone to thrive rather than just survive. I emphasise that education leaders don't need to be trapped by the accountability imposed by a national education service and that rather than being a peripheral issue, having a sustainability ethos is really the only 'sensible' option on many levels. A sustainability mindset can throw off the chains of compliance laid down by others for reasons of power and/or outdated processes and traditions.

## Age of Stupid?

Most Baby Boomers and many in succeeding generations have been living in Cloud Cuckoo Land by perpetuating a myth that we should expect indefinite economic growth on a finite planet. Consequently, graphs illustrating the rise of greenhouse gases and species extinction show exponential trends. When cells in the body grow like this, we call it cancer! And it's not as if greening the present economy or waiting for various techno fixes or large-scale geo-engineering<sup>7</sup> will necessarily be our ultimate salvation (although aspects of these will be needed). Just as importantly, we need a change of priorities within a change in our very culture. Schools should be in the vanguard of this change. Films such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and its sequel spell out

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7 See <https://www.geoengineeringwatch.org/>.

in graphic detail the ‘factual’ overview of our plight.<sup>8</sup> For me though, the 2009 film *The Age of Stupid* makes more of an emotional impact. It stars the late great Pete Postlethwaite, who plays an old man living in the devastated world of 2055. He watches archive footage from 2008 and asks: Why didn’t we stop climate change when we had the chance? Thought provoking and scary!

Most schools have tinges of green, but they’re not really sustainable in the same way wider society isn’t. Schools with sustainability at their core can overcome this by being part of the zero waste ‘circular economy’ which is regenerative by design and aims to gradually decouple growth from the consumption of finite resources, which ensures environmental, social and economic harmony into the distant future. All this is in contrast to the ‘take–make–use–dump’ linear model, escalated exponentially by the Industrial Revolution and based on fossil fuels. A circular economy works in harmony with the biosphere, and if happiness isn’t dependent on the consumption of ever more stuff, why should schools subscribe to the old unsustainable narrative? The practical ways of working towards this circularity in schools feature in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Unfortunately, we are beset by a variety of linearity, much of which contributes to unsustainability. In Chapter 2, I highlight the problems with the ‘WEIRD’ linear/rational thinking in contrast to more rewarding ecological systems approaches. The novelist Hilary Mantel said, ‘I don’t dwell on time’s arrow. I’m looking at what’s cyclical’ (*Guardian*, 2020). Perhaps we should all do this a bit more.

In this light, Chapter 3 talks about ‘decarbonising the curriculum’ by going through a similar and linked process of ‘decolonising the curriculum’. Both these elements can be seen as a reaction against the exploitative culture and structures of power that have dominated our society from time immemorial through the mercenary exploitation of the biosphere and human resources for the advantage of the few at the expense of the many. You don’t have to go too far down the social stratification from me and you to see this, let alone viewing countries in the so-called ‘developing world’. It’s significant that questioning the status quo regarding the treatment of minorities (who in number terms are actually the majority) and the biosphere is becoming

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8 The scientific facts presented by Gore are largely irrefutable and should have scared us into change. Why hasn’t it? Once again complex psychology is at large.

more mainstream, giving us cause for hope. The crimes against humanity in the form of genocide are being extended to ecocide (Higgins, 2015) as litigation has begun across the world to prosecute individuals and corporations for damaging the natural world on which we all depend. The rights of the planet are at last coming to the fore. Leaders for Sustainability are part of this paradigm change.

## Going with the Flow

To address our planetary challenges, there's a clamour for change from learners of all ages. For example, economics students at universities are rejecting classical and neo-classical economics in favour of sustainability based 'New Economics'. At the other end of the education spectrum, children and parents of primary schools lobby for more local climate change action. Too often the response, if any, from education providers can be dismissive, too tokenistic or not joined up. Nonetheless, education leaders at all levels should be galvanised by the following research:

- Only 4% of pupils 9–18 surveyed feel that they know a lot about climate change; 42% say they have learnt a little or hardly anything or nothing at school about the environment; 68% want to learn more about the environment and climate change; 49% would like to be more involved in projects or activities that help the environment; and 86% thought all schools and colleges should help pupils to do things to help the environment (Green Schools Project/NUS pupil survey, 2019).
- 75% of teachers feel they haven't received adequate training to educate students about climate change; 69% think there should be more teaching about climate change in UK schools; and 70% think that the education system needs radical change for the times we live in (YouGov/Oxfam, 2019).
- 71% of the general public said learning about climate change should be part of the school curriculum (YouGov, 2020).

I feel it's rather shaming that many school leaders sit back and watch children and students taking the lead. Are they too compliant, risk averse, cowed

by the system, or just too happy with the status quo? The English inspection body (Ofsted) is equally obtuse. For example, the English Learning and Sustainability Alliance (ELSA) lobbied Ofsted with the following extrapolated suggestions and requests, i.e. that inspectors:

- encourage reporting and look for evidence of learning for sustainability and suggest whole-school approaches to it;
- look for integrated approaches to curriculum, behaviour and attitudes and personal development;
- use the interview time with students to see how their education matches with their concerns about the future and the world.

Furthermore, that Ofsted:

- suggests continuing professional development (CPD) for whole-school approaches;
- redefine 'quality of education' judgements to include educating for a socially responsible and sustainable world and link with Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan (and Bill) and DfID's Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning so that SDG4 is reported on in a holistic way.

Source: Scott (2019)

To date, Ofsted has taken no notice of these recommendations.

The desire to live sustainably is also much more apparent across the general population. For example, the Climate Assembly UK (2020, p. 10), which is a branch of the Citizenship Assembly, came up with 25 recommendations in order of priority. Number one was: 'Informing and educating everyone (the public, industry, individuals and government) about Climate Change.' Within the top 10 recommendations included the desire for 'a joined-up approach across the system and all levels of society' and 'local community engagement'. This Assembly was recruited at random from across the demographics and gives yet another mandate for a Leader for Sustainability in a school.

## Fish, Forfeiture and Frogs

Chapter 5 shows how Leaders for Sustainability have an in-depth knowledge of their catchment areas and the wider world past and present. This provides added insight into the causes of many of our unsustainable tendencies, allowing an escape from the following ‘syndromes’. Although they can be viewed as clichés, I’ve found them to be useful points of reference.

‘Shifting Baseline Syndrome’ (SBS) was a phrase first coined by Pauly (1995). He was an ecologist looking at fisheries and came to the conclusion that other ecologists tended to judge the health of fish-stocks by comparing them with how they were at the start of their careers, rather than investigating further back through historical records. As a result, some of their findings didn’t fully take account of declines over time because the baseline was set too recently. McClenachan (2009) showed this by studying photographs of trophy fish caught off the coast of Florida. In the 1950s they were longer than a tall man. By the 2000s their average length was less than 30cm. This concept has been used in many other ecological studies and also by writers such as Robert Macfarlane, when highlighting how children and adults today tend to know much less about the natural world and so value it less. They don’t realise that it has diminished over time because they have no comparisons (see also M. Soga and K. J. Gaston, 2018).



By permission: Simone Lia

The Joni Mitchell song ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ was about this, summed up by the pertinent lines ‘They paved paradise and put up a parking lot’ and ‘You don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone’.

It's good to see that an increasing number of younger people are overcoming SBS in the light of the climate emergency. They *do* realise what they're losing and wish to do something about it, often to the shame of their elders, as exemplified by Greta Thunberg's campaigns. Often, we don't really appreciate people until they have departed.

There is a related concept called 'Corporate Memory Loss' (CML). Gardener and Bainbridge (2006) found examples of this where experienced personnel left a company without fully passing on their knowledge to those remaining or new people coming in. This sometimes led to drops in health and safety standards and the malfunctioning of certain administrative systems. They said that there was nothing new in this as it had always occurred particularly in periods of rapid change. To illustrate this, they quoted Santayana (1905): 'Progress, far from consisting in change, depends upon retentiveness. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. Change can also be mistaken for progress if we always think bigger is better and that upgrades are always beneficial. In the context of sustainability, this book argues that education should be part of a process of cultural change, enrichment and adaptation rather than just promoting a narrow definition of 'progress'. This includes developing the wisdom to know what to retain, what to resist and what to adopt, otherwise our ability to cope is always in catch-up mode due to the *rapidification* caused by technological advances.<sup>9</sup>

The 'Boiled Frog Syndrome' describes how if a frog is thrown into boiling water, it'll jump out immediately. If, however, it's placed into tepid water and the heat is gradually turned up, it'll be less likely to notice and will end up being compliantly boiled. This is a metaphor for any situation that is unacceptable, but which if introduced incrementally and surreptitiously will become the accepted 'norm'. In my opinion this is what has happened to many education leaders in England. They've been 'boiled', by being assimilated into a system which although they might periodically grumble about, generally they comply with its demands. This has led to the narrowing of the curriculum and plummeting mental health of students and staff in schools. Despite prevailing challenges, education should aim to help provide for the 'greater good' of everyone in terms of physical safety, mental well-being and social justice.

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9 In his second encyclical, *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home* (2015, p. 16), Pope Francis refers to an acceleration in the pace of life and work ('rapidification'), which causes anxiety to individuals, places strain on communities, and harms the environment.

These can't exist on a 'sick planet', and conversely a healthy planet needs 'well people' in all senses. Well-being is also linked to school improvement (Rees, 2017) and this is why it features prominently throughout the book.

I was depressed to hear a principal of a sixth form college bemoaning the way the loss of exams due to the COVID-19 crisis. I paraphrase him here: "These students have been in full-time education since the age of 4 and at the age of 18, at the *culmination of their schooling*, have been robbed of the chance of a university place and successful career." He was displaying the classic signs of Boiled Frog Syndrome. Is it really the case that a young person's time in school is all about the build-up to the exams they take between the ages of 16 and 18? Is the 'end product' above the 'process'? Shouldn't education be as much 'drawing out' a child's/student's originality (to return to original etymological meanings) as 'putting in' and examining the way a person retains this? Shouldn't education be a process of synthesis between educators and learners which produces a new and better culture? At the moment it appears that we spent far too much time weighing the pig rather than feeding it!

## Talk is Cheap

There are myriad books on education leadership, written by authors ranging from eminent academics to cultish gurus. I reference some of these, although I keep returning to the practical things we did in my own schools to embed sustainability and what effects these had. This not only aims to show the 'Art of the Possible', but also how we as leaders have a rich potential to deviate from the norm without jeopardising our positions or those of colleagues and enhance what can be done on the ground to embed sustainability in the widest sense. It's difficult to provide hard and fast templates for this because each school is unique, but I suggest ways of operating which can be tailored to the situation of any school. To provide a context for this, I suggest the 'Five Cs of Sustainability' as follows (see also Figure 1):

- **Captaincy** – through an in-depth study of leaders in a wide variety of primary schools who operated Green Flag Eco-schools, I distil out what a Leader for Sustainability really looks like, how they operate and are deserving of a leadership category of their own. I give examples



of whole-school approaches through systems thinking and planning frameworks for those who wish to embed sustainability rather than just see it as a bolt-on. Captains of Sustainability lead from the front where necessary, but more often use distributive and servant methods to empower everyone for the greater good.

- **Curriculum** – Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is explored and I give lots of practical examples of how it can enhance teaching and learning through cross-curricular approaches, while also enabling schools to tick the ‘Standards Agenda’ boxes. The value of learning via head, heart and hands is central to this process and exemplified in Forest School practices. The thorny problem of sustainability bias is tackled. How can we enable children to deal with issues impartially, while also wishing them to live more sustainably?
- **Campus** – a school’s buildings and grounds can be utilised to bring down a school’s overall carbon and other footprints and improve biodiversity, while enriching the ESD curriculum. This is where schools can showcase sustainability in tangible forms such as low-impact procurement and skilful waste and energy management. This can be highly influential for any people who use them day to day or who come across them as physical or online visitors. Reduce, Recycle, Reuse, Repair and Repurpose feature prominently. I also show that behaviour change is often more important than grand ‘eco-technology’ when it comes to sustainability and another reason to strongly link Campus with Curriculum.
- **Community** – any school community should be an asset rather than a ‘problem’, and sustainability can be the catalyst for community enrichment which then provides a positive feedback loop into the children’s experience of education and their capacity to learn. I show how this also manifests itself in improved community cohesion and mental health for all school stakeholders. Early intervention programmes are also shown to benefit from a sustainability approach, taking the ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda to a new dimension in terms of physical, mental and social well-being.
- **Connections** – ‘linked thinking’ are the watchwords here. This is where Leaders for Sustainability subtly weave together all the elements within

each of the other 'Cs' and make relevant connections between them. I provide additional examples of how making connections can improve overall 'wisdom' (individually and collectively) through additional insights into the complexities of the modern world and how schools can play a pivotal role in securing a sustainable future.<sup>10</sup>

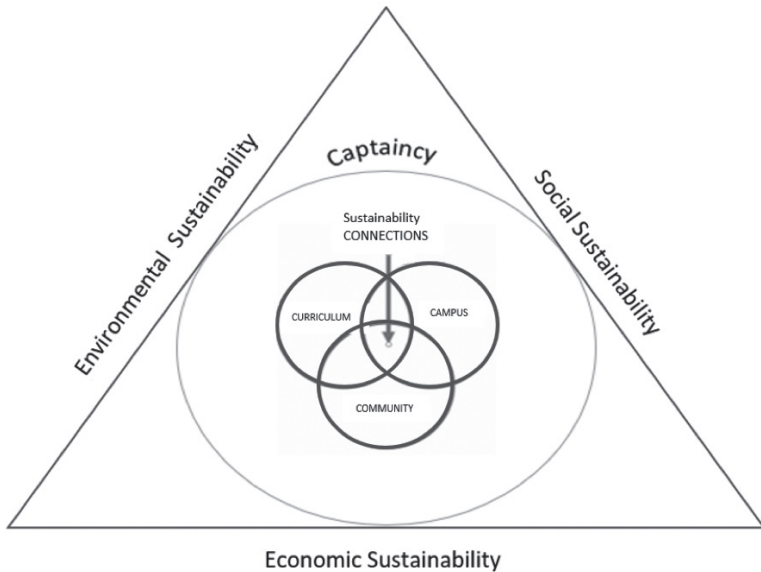


Figure 1: Main elements of the book

Education leaders are well placed to cause butterfly effects that initiate even greater waves which can disrupt the destructive status quo.<sup>11</sup> This requires a certain kind of moral fibre, itself a product of a certain set of values, which most have within themselves if they care to fully use it. This incorporates a sixth 'C', namely Courage, featured in the concluding chapter.

10 The linear format of most books, be they fact or fiction, can also be a barrier to holistic thought. Throughout the book, I show how links between areas of knowledge and concepts are just as important as the knowledge and concepts themselves. Having an ecological perspective encourages people to eschew computational and linear thinking and 'silver bullet' solutions. This is why I highlight the interconnectedness of issues, not just to appreciate the complexity of things, but to encourage the search for joined-up initiatives. The 'think global, act local' adage is a vital part of this and another important strand of the narrative.

11 The butterfly effect was popularised by climatologist Edward N. Lorenz in 1963 and became a central concept of chaos theory. The "innumerable" interconnections of nature, Lorenz noted, mean a butterfly's flap could cause a tornado – or, for all we know, could prevent one. Similarly, should we make even a tiny alteration to nature, "we shall never know what would have happened if we had not disturbed it," since subsequent changes are too complex and entangled to restore a previous state (Dizikes, 2008).

To make informed judgements about sustainability, throughout the book interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches are recommended. This is where much of our education and schooling lets us down because it tends to be non-joined up and subject siloed and this gets worse as children get older. Sustainability is a natural vehicle for developing a type of fully integrated learning ecology for the benefit of all. This also keys into the conventional school improvement agenda, where sustainable schools can also deliver success as measured by test results and outside inspections through benevolent rather than coercive means and without being the be all and end all of a school's existence.

The 'Leadership for Sustainability Recommendations' below and at the end of each chapter are there to encourage further thought and discussions among school stakeholders.

## Leadership for Sustainability Recommendations

- Escape Shifting Baseline and Boiled Frog Syndromes by stepping back and taking a fresh look at your school's situation and how it operates in the context of external factors. Assess how much influence you *really* have over your situation rather than what others imply or tell you. Question your school's present 'normal'. Make a point of accessing information and people who aren't in your echo chamber. Try to be open minded about ideas and concepts which may seem alien, but might inspire new thinking.
- Escape fatalism and cynicism in relation to your situation. Remember how you felt at the start of your career, when it's likely more things seemed possible.
- Recognise that school leaders are in a fantastic position to help the cause of sustainability as part of the same educative process which influences the lives and life chances of thousands of children who pass through the school and tens of thousands plus who may be influenced through various butterfly effects.

# ***Leadership for Sustainability* shares informed insights and a range of practical approaches to help school leaders play their part in making their schools more environmentally friendly and thus better places to learn for all.**

Mobilised by the stirring words and protests of Greta Thunberg, young people all over the globe are calling for more action to combat climate change and better protect their futures. Yet they cannot do this alone. They are reliant on people in positions of power to get the necessary changes in motion – and these people include their own school leaders within their own local communities.

This book is a rallying cry for all schools to unleash their potential and deliver a brighter future for both their pupils and society at large. And this urgency is underlined by the stark warnings that feature in the UN's Code Red climate report.

In *Leadership for Sustainability*, David Dixon draws on his doctoral research and experience as a cross-phase head teacher to set out how school leaders can embed tried and tested eco-friendly practices within the school setting that can also be central to overall school improvement, including that recognised by inspectors. David weaves his guidance around the 'Five Cs of Sustainability' – captaincy, curriculum, campus, community, and connections – to position sustainability as a natural vehicle for developing a type of fully integrated learning ecology and culture for the benefit of all.



**Dr David Dixon** was a full-time primary teacher for 15 years before becoming a head teacher for the following two decades. In that time, he promoted the twin causes of environmental education and sustainability, which formed the central ethos of his schools. David is now a freelance education consultant, specialising in curriculum and leadership and helping individual schools to link sustainability with school improvement more generally.



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