

Manifest – Call to Action

Erasmus+ Project | VET Schools | Students at the core

FullCircle is more than a sustainability project. It is a shared learning journey in which vocational schools, teachers, students, parents and local communities explored what it truly means to close loops, rethink resources and place students at the heart of change.

Throughout the project, the partner schools did not operate as separate islands. By visiting one another's initiatives, **exchanging practices and reflecting together** on challenges and solutions, partners continuously learned from each other's experiences. Ideas developed in one school inspired adaptations in another, encouraging participants to rethink how circular and sustainable practices could be implemented within their own educational and cultural contexts. In this way, FullCircle became not only a collection of local projects, but also a **shared European learning process** based on collaboration, exchange and knowledge transfer.

Through **hands-on initiatives** – such as upcycling ateliers, greener schoolyards, vegetable gardens and outdoor classrooms – partners discovered that sustainability is not an abstract concept, but a **lived experience**. These practices reshaped mindsets, redefined roles and strengthened relationships within and beyond the school environment.

This Call to Action captures why being part of FullCircle mattered, what partners gained from the process and which lessons are worth carrying forward – within schools and far beyond.

1. Upcycling atelier – Learning by doing

The upcycling atelier at *GO! Campus Nexus DUO (Belgium)* showed that circular thinking thrives when schools open themselves to the wider world. Actively engaging external partners – such as material suppliers, local businesses, clients and community actors – proved essential. These **collaborations** transformed the project from an internal school activity into a functioning, **real-life system of exchange**.

Students played a central role. Once involved, they took initiatives independently: paying closer attention to daily waste streams, questioning material choices and proposing new ideas without prompting. Even students close to graduation asked to remain involved in the project, as they felt a strong **sense of ownership and belonging**. Creativity emerged naturally when students were trusted as active contributors rather than passive participants.

A strong illustration of this approach was the natural soap-making activity at *Sredno uchilishte "Vasil Levski" (Bulgaria)*, a school specialising in Technology of Pharmaceuticals, Perfumery and Cosmetics. As part of their professional training, students produced solid soaps using natural ingredients, carefully considering composition, safety and quality. The activity was framed as an **upcycling and circular practice**: by choosing solid soap formats, plastic packaging was avoided, thereby reducing waste. Students critically reflected on material use, sourcing and the wider environmental footprint of cosmetic products. In this way, vocational education and circular thinking were meaningfully and directly connected.

KEY LESSON 1

When students are given genuine ownership and schools actively collaborate with external partners, circular practices develop organically and can be sustained over time.

2. Greening the schoolyard – From space to living system

Transforming underused schoolyard spaces into green environments proved to be a clear gain for participating schools. Areas that once held little educational or social value became shared assets: places for learning, reflection and **connection with nature**. In addition, these green interventions contributed to **climate adaptation** by increasing shade, improving water retention and supporting biodiversity within the school environment.

A strong example comes from *GO! atheneum en leefschoolor De Tandem (Belgium)*, where an eco-team of students and teachers worked closely together to redesign and develop an inner courtyard. Through a collaborative process, the courtyard evolved into a green learning space that supports both **wellbeing and environmental awareness**.

At *GO! Atheneum Nexus (Belgium)*, learners and staff were also actively involved in greening their schoolyard, albeit within different constraints. As the school is undergoing a complete renovation soon, a large-scale redesign of the playground was not feasible. Instead, the school chose to plant a single ‘**tree of the future**’, which will be preserved in the long-term masterplan.

At *Obchodná akadémia (Slovakia)*, students and teachers engaged in a wide range of hands-on activities: planting flowers, trees and shrubs; digging and relocating compost; watering, weeding and installing bird feeders. Over time, the playground evolved from a neglected space into a green, **welcoming and calming** environment.

Teamwork lay at the heart of each transformation. Large amounts of work were accomplished collectively and the positive **collaborative atmosphere** fostered a strong sense of shared pride in the outcomes. Beyond the visible physical changes, the greening initiatives generated significant learning gains. Students and teachers developed practical knowledge about plants, sowing, and garden maintenance. Listening to one another’s ideas proved essential and collaboration not only accelerated the work but also **strengthened relationships** between learners and staff.

KEY LESSON 2

Greening the schoolyard is both a physical and a social transformation. When collaboration and long-term thinking are embraced, it supports climate adaptation, builds skills, nurtures ecosystems and strengthens school communities.

3. The vegetable garden – From consumers to producers

The creation of vegetable gardens represented a powerful shift in perspective: schools moved from being solely consumers to becoming **active producers**. For students, this change generated both excitement and awareness, as food on a plate was no longer taken for granted but understood as the result of interconnected ecological and human processes.

Learning extended far beyond planting and harvesting. At *IPSSEOA Carmine Russo – Ugo Tognazzi (Italy)*, *Stichting Educacion Profesional Basico (Aruba)* and *Maris Stella VSBO (Curaçao)*, students explored composting cycles, plant species and growth patterns. Through **hands-on experience**, they developed a concrete understanding of what plants need to thrive: healthy soil, effective water management and natural approaches to pest control. Ecological processes that often remain abstract became visible and directly meaningful. Knowledge was actively exchanged through an intense programme of activities, including the introduction and spread of hydroponic systems as an alternative and complementary method of cultivation.

As culinary schools, these partners connected the vegetable gardens directly to students' **future professions**. Sustainability did not stop at the harvest: self-grown vegetables and herbs were used to prepare seasonal dishes, inspire **locally rooted menus** and encourage reflection on reducing food waste.

Seasonal change became a real-world challenge and learning opportunity. Caring for the garden during school holidays required organization and shared responsibility. The first harvest brought a strong sense of achievement, reinforcing **motivation, pride and collective ownership**. The gardens required commitment and coordination across the entire school community, involving students, teachers and administrative staff alike.

The project also facilitated engagement beyond the school level. Ministries and local councils were involved, illustrating how school-based initiatives can **inspire policy support** and expansion to other schools. Learning was further broadened through exposure to more **resilient agricultural systems**, such as agroforestry, underlining the importance of robust food production models in the context of climate change.

KEY LESSON 3

School gardens nurture ecological knowledge, responsibility and systems thinking – while demonstrating that education can actively create value rather than merely transmit it.

4. Outdoor classroom – Learning beyond walls

The outdoor classroom at *Atheneum GO! Erasmus (Belgium)* did more than add infrastructure – it redefined what learning can look like. Its inauguration was not merely the opening of a physical space, but a clear statement that education does not belong exclusively within four walls. Parents, teachers and students gathered around a shared project, reinforcing the understanding that learning is a **collective responsibility**, rooted in place and strengthened by **community involvement**.

A similar experience emerged through the food forest installed at *Zespol Szkol Gospodarki Zywnosciowej I Agrobiznesu (Poland)*. Designed as a **multifunctional learning environment**, the space proved highly effective in supporting education beyond the traditional classroom.

Well-designed outdoor learning environments generate tangible **educational benefits**: they increase student engagement, improve concentration and contribute to emotional wellbeing. They also enable **experiential and interdisciplinary learning**. Ecology becomes visible, mathematics becomes measurable in space, and language learning is enriched through observation-based storytelling. In this way, outdoor education strengthens **environmental literacy** and encourages **care** for the local landscape – not as an abstract idea, but as a lived and embodied experience.

At the same time, outdoor learning spaces require sustained commitment. **Safety, durability and accessibility** are essential conditions; they determine whether the space becomes embedded in everyday practice or gradually falls out of use. Weather conditions, maintenance responsibilities and teachers' confidence in outdoor pedagogy remain real and ongoing challenges. Without structural support, clear responsibilities and appropriate training, the outdoor classroom risks remaining symbolic rather than achieving its full transformative potential.

KEY LESSON 4

Learning environments shape behaviour, imagination and relationships. Outdoor spaces can enhance education and strengthen community ties – but only when they are structurally supported, pedagogically integrated and collectively cared for.

Call to Action

The Erasmus+ FullCircle project is committed to creating and sustaining green school environments and educational practices. We believe that meaningful change in schools is both possible and sustainable when certain conditions are met:

- Students are trusted as active drivers of innovation
- Schools open themselves to collaboration with local communities and external partners
- Sustainability is practised through concrete action, not only taught in theory
- Education is understood as part of a broader social and ecological system

Building on these insights, we call on VET schools, educators, policymakers and local authorities to take decisive action:

- Embed circular and green practices into everyday school life
- Support and empower student-led initiatives and creative experimentation
- Invest in learning environments that connect education with nature and community
- Scale up demonstrated best practices through collaboration, networks and policy support

The impact of FullCircle extends beyond the participating schools themselves. Throughout the project, each partner contributed to the development of educational materials and practical learning resources for teachers and schools across Europe. By sharing these materials freely, the partnership aims to **support wider awareness** of circular and sustainable practices in vocational education and training.

FullCircle shows that when education truly comes full circle – **from ideas to action, from school to society** – the benefits extend far beyond the classroom. Students grow into engaged changemakers, schools become living laboratories for sustainability, and communities gain **resilient foundations for the future**.

Want to learn more about FullCircle?

Explore the projects, partner schools and practices on our website:
<https://www.fullcircle-eu.com>