Sustainable Schools landscape scan & case studies

Proposed Question

What sustainability efforts are school districts in VA, DC, MD, DE, and PA currently implementing and prioritizing, and what transferable lessons can selected district examples offer other school systems?

The project would serve two purposes:

1. Give the Education Workgroup a clearer picture of sustainability activity, priorities, regional patterns, and apparent gaps across a diverse sample of districts.
2. Identify and develop practical district examples that can be shared with peers to encourage replication, discussion, and connection.

Proposed Outputs

1) **Landscape scan for 20-25 school districts:** What are districts doing and prioritizing, and how mature or widespread are those efforts?
2) **Synthesis** (up to 5 pages) summarizing results of the scan, including major patterns, differences among districts or jurisdictions, and apparent gaps.
3) **Case studies (4-5):** What do selected sustainability efforts look like in practice, and what can other districts learn from them?
4) **Case study promotion strategy**: A brief strategy on how those cases should be packaged, recognized, distributed and converted into conversations among districts.

Proposed Scope

Geography: VA, DC, MD, DE, PA

Landscape scan only: The landscape scan would use a **purposive sample** (20-25 school districts), rather than attempt a comprehensive census.

School districts will include variation in:

- large / medium / small enrollment;
- urban / suburban / rural;
- geography;
- known sustainability activity versus less visibly active districts.

The Education Workgroup may nominate up to **5–8 priority districts** for inclusion.

Primary research is not included in the initial scope. The landscape scan and case studies will rely primarily on publicly available district, government, and partner sources. Where a particularly strong case would benefit from clarification or practitioner perspective, limited targeted outreach may be considered if time permits, but interviews are not required for completion of the pilot.

Project size: Approximately 35 hours.

Landscape Scan

Each school district would be assessed for:

- sustainability efforts currently underway or recently completed;
- sustainability actions identified as current priorities;
- the sustainability categories represented;
- implementation status and scale, where available;
- major targets or commitments;
- policy context, where readily identifiable;
- authoritative sources documenting those activities;
- potential case-study opportunities

Sustainability categories:

- **Buildings & energy**: Efficiency, HVAC/electrification, solar, renewable energy.
- **Transportation**: Electric buses, fleet changes, route/fuel initiatives.
- **Food & waste**: Food sourcing, food-waste reduction/recovery, composting, recycling.
- **Grounds, water & site stewardship**: Stormwater, native habitat, water conservation, grounds practices.
- **District-wide sustainability planning & operations**: Climate plans, sustainability staffing, emissions targets, procurement or cross-cutting initiatives.

Prioritized interventions. Only if they appear in:

- adopted sustainability/climate plan;
- strategic plan;
- capital improvement plan;
- board-approved goals;
- current budget;
- grant award/application;
- official district initiative with stated future actions.

Landscape Synthesis

The synthesis would look across districts rather than simply summarize them individually. Potential questions include:

- Which sustainability categories appear most frequently across the sample?
- Which activities are being implemented broadly versus piloted at a small number of schools?
- How do priorities differ by state, district size, geography, or other district characteristics?
- Which activities appear primarily policy-driven, funding-driven, or locally initiated?
- Where does comparatively little activity appear in the sample?
- Where is activity occurring but implementation remains limited in scale?
- What recurring enabling factors, barriers, or funding approaches appear?
- Which district efforts appear especially useful for peer learning or replication?

Case Study Selection

The landscape scan would also function as a **case-study pipeline**, screening promising examples by a number of factors.

There will be **4 case studies, with a 5th if time permits**, illustrating transferable sustainability practices.

Cases would ideally vary by intervention type, geography, and district context and could also serve as a reusable template for future Education Workgroup case studies.

Case study details include:

- What did the district do and why?
- How was it funded?
- What did implementation require?
- What financial outcome or cost is documented?
    - upfront cost;
    - annual savings;
    - avoided cost;
    - payback;
    - operating-cost change
- What concrete climate/environmental outcome is documented?
    - kWh/energy reduction;
    - GHG reduction;
    - fuel avoided;
    - waste diverted/prevented;
    - water saved;
    - food recovered;
    - habitat/site outcomes
- What barriers or lessons emerged?
- What would another district need to know before copying it?

Case Study Promotion & Learning Strategy

How do these stories generate recognition, peer exchange, and additional participation?

One potential example is a District Sustainability Spotlight **webinar series**. Rather than asking practitioners to prepare formal presentations, the Education Workgroup could host short moderated conversations based on completed case studies, with questions and slides prepared in advance.

Other options could include Education Workgroup or partner newsletters/websites, conference sessions, direct distribution through superintendent/ operations/ environmental-literacy networks, recognition through partner organizations, and optional media or professional-association amplification.

Component	What it would answer
1. Participation value proposition	Why would a district/project leader agree to be featured?
2. Distribution channels	Where should each case appear?
3. Recognition opportunities	How can participating districts and staff receive useful visibility?
4. Peer-learning mechanisms	How does a case become a conversation rather than a static article?
5. Repeatable workflow	How could the Education Workgroup continue the model after this pilot ends?