



Athens, Greece

Laboratory of Special Vocational Education of Agios Dimitrios

Everyone can contribute to a Sustainable Future



**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL**
Environmental
Action

accenture



**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL
PRIZES**



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Introduction

The Laboratory of Special Vocational Education of Agios Dimitrios, or E.E.E.EK, is a special education school for students with intellectual disabilities in Athens, Greece, which has created a profound bond between ecological and social inclusion. Through the creation of numerous projects, they began collaborating with other organisations and schools across the city. The school has demonstrated the power of giving a voice to those who are most excluded from society, and how this can be a part of the ecological and social change we need in the world. Students are trained in special vocations, and learning skills that they apply in their community projects, including the creation of a virtual social enterprise that they use to sell the products they have recycled from used household items. Currently, they are collaborating with over 30 schools, in the hope of showing the world the capacity their learners have to be a part of the environmental movement.



School Profile



Country:
Greece



Region:
Athens



School type:
Public school



Location area:
Urban



Student population:
201 to 300



Prize Category:
Environmental Action

“The idea of competition is a process that makes us become better. Our nomination among the 10 finalists in the World’s Best School Prizes makes us feel genuinely proud of our achievements. It motivates us to strive for continual improvement.”

–Sotiris Rimbapis,
School Principal



In-depth look

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

The Laboratory of Special Vocational Education of Agios Dimitrios (E.E.E.EK) is a public Secondary School under the Special Education Directorate of the Ministry of Education in Athens, Greece and is the largest of its kind in the country. The school currently has 240 students between the ages 13 to 22 with intellectual and developmental disabilities such as intellectual disability, down syndrome and autism spectrum disorders, which often make it difficult for these learners to go through traditional schooling systems.

The school seeks to make its' students' voices heard, and show that they are just as capable of changing the world as anyone else. In fact, the director of the school Mr Sotiris Rimbapis mentions

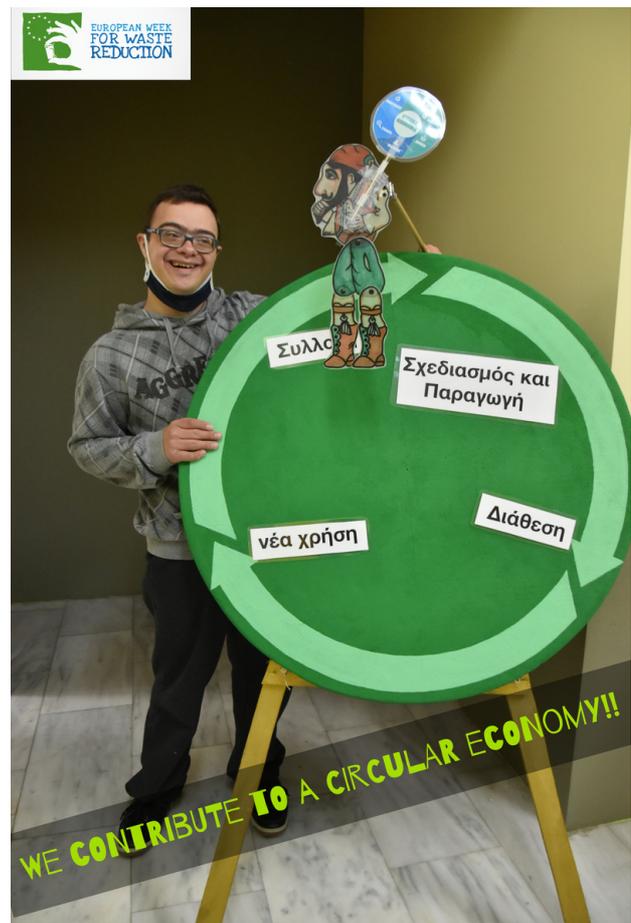
how “we believe in our students, we believe in their potential”. E.E.E.EK School foments values of inclusion, equality and agency where students' strengths, confidence and accomplishments are supported through vocational training for 6 years in the following specialisations: ceramics, gardening, woodwork, hydraulics, cooking, sewing and now environmental actions. Within the school building, there is a great number of educational resources (highly equipped laboratories, library, physiotherapy and occupational therapy rooms, internal swimming pool, indoor and outdoor gym, amphitheatre etc.



The school staff consists of 90 teachers and 30 specialists in professional support, all of whom have many years of experience in teaching students with disabilities – both at a primary and secondary school level, as well as in post-graduate studies. In recent years, they have begun integrating ecological action into their teaching.

Learners clearly express their interest through keen participation, they organise career education programmes, environmental, cultural, and health education and support innovative actions. Being a school with differently-abled students comes with a lot of stigmas. Efstratia Chrysou, special education teacher at the school mentions how “students from general schools assume our students cannot do many things”, they were often extremely surprised by E.E.E.EK students’ ability to collaborate through profound social interaction, a clear vision and planning skills for future projects.

The teachers, on the other hand, never doubted their students’ abilities. The school has demonstrated that we need to see not just our ecology differently, but to foster trust in the ability of all of the world's children, including those we mistakenly see as less capable. They have guided students towards maximising their strengths, and the impact of their actions is as much notable as it is commendable.





“Our students are so passionate, so happy, so genuine, it’s an amazing experience working with them. The most important thing is to have a great vision, to make a positive impact in the local community and then grow from there and make a real change.”

- Efstratia Chrysou, Special Education Teacher and Environmental Action Coordinator



EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

The school teachers started implementing environmental education into the programmes applied at the school. They realised there is no collection point for household utensils and tools in the city of Athens and sought to scale their actions by filling the specific gap. The students were the ones who thought about how they could make these objects useful, protect the environment and help their community. The school reached out to the municipality and created a plan to start a collection point. The students take the objects, redesign them, and sell them at the end of the school year. This was eventually transitioned into a virtual social enterprise that students created and now run independently called ReUZ+ as a collaborative student virtual enterprise between two public schools; the Laboratory of Special Vocational Education of Agios Dimitrios (E.E.E.EK.K.) and the 6th Junior High School of Agios Dimitrios. It operates within the circular economy, its principal activity is to collect, process and upcycle old household utensils and tools into unique works of art or as useful objects once again. The money collected is utilised to support the breakfast for the school students facing financial difficulties.

The learners and teachers had realised the importance of collaboration at this stage and decided to take their skills to the next level and show the wider community what they could do. They began planning for the European Waste Reduction Week 2021 in collaboration with the Municipality of Agios Dimitrios, the Environmental Education Office of the Directorate of Secondary Education of the Southern Sector of Attica, and the non-profit organisation “No Waste 21”. Students at E.E.E.EK invited the schools of the Municipality of Agios Dimitrios, proposing projects of circular communities with the aim of transitioning to sustainable consumption and production patterns in order to achieve zero waste targets.



They visited the neighbouring schools of formal education, placed posters, and informed the students of all levels of education about their actions. They organised experiential information and awareness action learning, focusing on reusing and redesigning household utensils. This resulted in products such as lamps, frames, hangers, pots, etc. which were presented by students from the special education school and their partners through their digital platforms.

The weekly presentations were attended by school students and staff from all education levels, education executives and representatives of the local government. They have placed special collection bins in the partner schools for reusing household utensils and tools to encourage all target groups to become informed and partake in promoting the reduction of unnecessary consumption by focusing on giving what they already have “a second chance”, as mentioned by Efstratia Chrysou. The first initiative of the students from the special education school took part in the European Competition for the Reduction of Waste EWWR21 through the national coordinator of the actions E.O.AN. (Hellenic Recycling Organisation) The environmental action was selected among the three finalists in the European Competition EWWR21 which took place on the 9th of June 2022 in Brussels and managed to take the first prize in the Educational Establishment category.

Today, they hold their own recycling point, where other schools bring used household items for students at E.E.E.EK to keep pushing forward their work. Going forward, learners hope to make use of ReUZ to create a Center for the Collection and Creative Reuse of household utensils, contributing to the reduction of urban waste. Profits made by the virtual platform will be used to support vulnerable social groups.



The experience-based, interdisciplinary, student-centred approach have already had a profound, positive effect on the whole school, and Athens more broadly.



“We believe that small, local, fair and inclusive circular communities can play a major role in pushing Europe and the whole world towards a sustainable future”

-Georgia Boulmeti, Social Worker at E.E.E.EK



OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

Continuing the Movement

Efstratia Chrysou, Special Education Teacher and Environmental Action Coordinator, mentions that students “made a website and replicated their practice with other schools, not only in the Municipality but in the whole city of Athens”. She continues saying “we are trying to send a message on reducing waste, and we focus on creating a centre to reuse household objects”. During the European Waste Reduction Week, E.E.E.EK became recognised by over 30 schools they now collaborate with when learners blew the audience away with the initiatives they had produced. To get there, the school organized eco-action performances, were musicians at the school wrote and sang songs. The activities included thematic sketches and karagiozis’ shadow theatre performances, videos, songs and various environmental events in the context of socially oriented entrepreneurship.

Empowerment and Creating Voice

An important mention of the school's success is its deep focus on inclusion and empowerment. Students at the school constantly struggle with aspects of life that other people may find incredibly easily. Mrs Chrysou mentions “our students are so passionate, so happy, so genuine, it’s an amazing experience working with them”. Perhaps one of their most commendable successes is the platform they have given young learners who are often silenced within society. The goals the school has already achieved impacted students at multiple levels, including social, psychological, cognitive and environmental aspects of their lives, as well as for the local and wider community. This would not have been possible without successfully integrating an inclusive approach towards each of their steps going forward.



In the process of integrating eco-action into their workshops, students who participated realised their potential to contribute towards socially and ecologically conscious economic progress.

ReUz

The innovative green, socially conscious business platform familiarises students with the basic principles of circular economy and sustainability, both within and outside E.E.E.EK school. Their actions are being promoted on social media in order to encourage all target groups to be informed and help reduce unnecessary consumption by focusing on giving a second life to existing products. However, this was also tied in with the concept of social enterprise, meeting social needs while respecting the natural and social environment. The diffusion of students' actions in the context of a circular economy,



by reusing household utensils and tools, has resulted in a search for innovative solutions to modern problems. Moreover, an undertaking of public benefit initiatives. Today, the program is completely student-run and allows learners to continue raising funds.



Key Steps



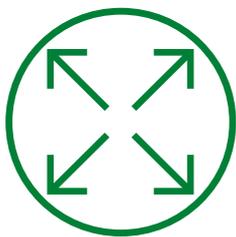
LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE

Experiential learning through entrepreneurship education is a purely practice-oriented process that elevated students with disabilities through their participation in student trade fairs and other relevant events. They are given the opportunity to feel like equal members of society as they present their actions between students of general education on equal terms. During cooking classes, at the beginning of 2007, students and teachers discussed how to begin addressing vulnerable social groups by promoting Greece's local economy.

Learners wanted to promote places around Greece, and their products. So, they began creating innovative snacks based on a variety of traditional products which became a wide success. Students would also gather oranges, lemons, and other crops from their gardens, as well as around the community, where wild fruit trees often leave more than what is consumed. They made use of these goods during cooking classes, created a social enterprise with



environmental and social impact and managed to get a significant distinction as the best stand in the whole of Greece. The awards and the recognition of their initiatives made them believe in their potential and moved forward with the realisation of one of their implemented ideas with the brand name School Synergy Snacks. where graduates of special education schools are employed.



REACHING OUTWARDS

Following the success of the cooking class products, the other five laboratories, - producing lamps, sewing, gardening and ceramics - became involved in the subsequent projects students began putting forward. They began turning towards waste reduction, food production and consumption, focusing deeply on vulnerable social groups. Among their goals is to increase awareness about the importance of environment conservation and contribute to the reduction of landfill sites' pressure and the development of a circular economy.





ACTIVATING COLLABORATION

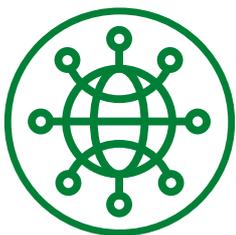
In order to put their words into action, the school invited schools from around the Municipality to act together, work together and form circular communities with the aim of transitioning to sustainable consumption and production patterns in order to achieve zero waste targets. The students of the special education school visited the neighbouring schools of formal education, placed posters and informed the students of all levels of education about their actions. They organised information sessions based on their own experiences and workshops on reusing useful objects, these were presented to other schools through a digital platform. The activities included thematic sketches and karagiozis' (traditional Greek shadow puppet) performances, videos, songs and various environmental events in the context of socially oriented entrepreneurship. Weekly presentations were attended by schools from all education levels and all staff members. Representatives of the local government also came to share their words with students.





TAKING ACTION

The school moved beyond the projects they had been working on, placing special collection bins in the partner schools for reusing household utensils and tools in order to encourage all target groups to be informed. This is when the collaborative virtual and social enterprise ReUZ was born. Through the student social enterprise, the students were able to propel their project forward and continue expanding their impact. Group work during weekly board meetings of the students' virtual business could be seen through the deep cooperation, team spirit and freedom of expression of students' views. Moreover, this included the encouragement of decision-making by the team members, both within and outside the school.



EXPANDING VIRTUALLY

Students saw the potential of virtual platforms for communicating their ambitions. So, they sought to become more informed. By the time they reached the 2020-2021 school year, students were participating for their 5th time in the Virtual Business programme of Junior Achievement Greece with a new virtual



company. During this time, they gained insights into the value of recycling and the reuse of household utensils. This meant going on to raise awareness within the schools involved of what they had learnt. They utilised their imagination and creativity and transformed the old utensils that they collected in the special bins of their business into useful decorative objects such as frames, flower pots, clocks, hangers, etc. As the enterprise grew, learners created the company logo and a slogan “see your utensils differently”, and even wrote an environmental song.

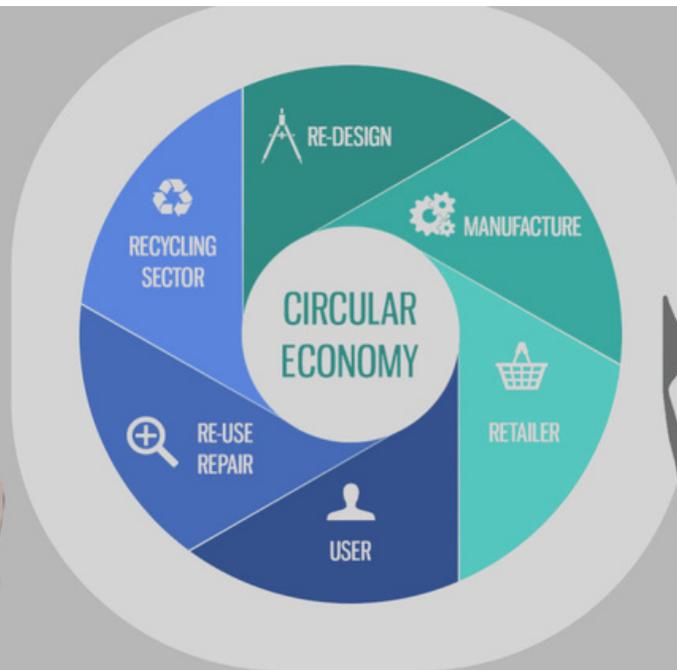


MOVING TOWARDS THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Students decided to spread the message of reusing utensils to the community through brochures and posters. They also participated in competitions such as the best Promo Video 2021 with the promotion video of the company organised by JA Greece and won 7th place nationwide. This was done in order to gain exposure and grow collaboration. The school also participated and excelled in the Bravo Schools 2021 competition in the field of Innovative Curricula for SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. The programme allowed the school to join the international school network of the World's Largest Lesson and the Network of Ambassadors Schools for



the 17 Global Goals in Action SDGs Schools Club. As aforementioned, the virtual platform ReUZ also achieved popularity, selling many products produced by students and contributing to programmes providing daily school breakfasts for the students of the school in vulnerable economic groups.



GIVE YOUR USED STUFF A SECOND CHANCE...



Advice and Guidance

The school holds inclusion dear to its heart, as the concept is key for any social or environmental movement to succeed. They mention how it is important for us to “keep working together” – collaboration and inclusion of those who aren't heard enough is crucial. They remind us to always make the students the centre of the projects they create, empowering them and ensuring they can visualise the change they can make in the world. Beyond this, Mrs Boulmeti expresses how “we believe that small, circular communities, small schools can make a change and make a difference if we have teamwork – this is the key to success”. Lastly, Efstratia Chrysou mentions how crucial it is to collaborate “but the most important thing is to have a great vision, to have an impact in the local community, then grow from there and make a real change”.

More information

 [ΕΕΕΕΚ Αγίου Δημητρίου](#)

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 <http://www.eeeek.gr/>

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Learn more about their work by watching their event at 2022's T4 World Education Week: [watch here](#)

