



INFLUENCES ON SUSTAINABILITY UPTAKE IN K-12 EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STAFF

The Challenge: Policy research in education has typically taken the form of qualitative small-scale, non-comparative case studies; however, large-scale quantitative data often provides better support for policy decision-making. SEPN’s national survey is the first cross-Canadian empirical quantitative exploration of influences on sustainability uptake in education policy development.

Main Findings: Participants perceived school divisions, existing school and school division policies, school administrators, and sustainability coordinators to be most influential in sustainability uptake in education policy development—versus ministries of education and provinces. Apathetic attitudes and resources were the main barriers to sustainability uptake in policy development.

Take Action: SEPN’s findings suggest ministries of education could be better engaging schools and school divisions during policy development. The results also point to common facilitators and barriers encountered during policy development, for which policy actors working to increase sustainability uptake in education policy could plan for during the policy development process.

For full results see: Chopin, N.S., McKenzie, M., Haluza-DeLay, R., & MacDonald, R. (Forthcoming). The influences on sustainability uptake in K-12 education policy development: A national survey of educators, administrators, and staff.

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Sustainability Uptake in K-12 Education Policy Development

SEPN’s online survey captured on-the-ground experiences with sustainability in education policy in the Canadian K-12 formal education system. This portion of the research examined the influences and roles of actors, other policies, community-specific factors, networks, media, and resources in the development of educational policies that incorporate sustainability.

SEPN used a combination of purposive and convenience sampling with quotas established for proportional representation by province. Recruitment for the convenience sample was via listservs, newsletters, website postings, social media, teacher federations, specialists’ associations, unions, and non-profit organizations, including SEPN’s partners.

A total of 206 participants, including 121 teachers, 18 school staff and administrators, 41 school division (SD) staff and administrators, 7 sustainability/facilities staff, 1 ministry of education staff, and 18 other staff answered the survey. Participants were required to be at least “somewhat” familiar with how policies that address sustainability were developed in their K-12 work setting.

Questionnaire and Analysis

The survey examined various influences on sustainability uptake in policy development in the Canadian K-12 education system via a series of matrix-format likert-style questions using a 4-point scale of “not at all,” “to some extent,” “to a moderate extent,” and “to a large extent.” SEPN calculated **Influence Index Scores (IIS)** using weighted averages for **individual survey questions**, as well as an average ISS for each **influence category** (i.e., policy actors, other policies, networks, media). Index scores ranged from 0 (non-influential) to 4 (very influential).

One check-all-that apply question examined the influence of **place-based factors**, for which SEPN calculated the percent response.

Finally, two qualitative questions asked about **drivers and barriers to policy development**, which were coded into themes and analyzed in relation to the quantitative data.

Influence Index Scores

SEPN found that **policy actors and other policies were viewed as having the most influence** on sustainability uptake in K-12 formal education policy development overall. Media and networks emerged as moderate influencers of sustainability uptake in policy development.

Overall, when looking at individual survey questions, the top five influencers of sustainability in education policy development were perceived by participants to be **school divisions (IIS = 3.11)**, **existing work setting policies (IIS = 3.03)**, **existing SD policies (IIS = 3.02)**, **school administrators (IIS = 2.94)**, and **sustainability coordinators (IIS = 2.89)**.

Influence Category	Individual Survey Questions Explored	Average IIS*
Policy Actors	School division, school administrator, sustainability coordinator, ministry of education, teachers, facilities staff, students, families, the public	2.62
Other Policies	Work setting, school division, municipal, provincial, other local, national, international	2.51
Media	Web-based resources, social media, print news, TV/film, scholarly publications, radio	2.33
Network	Local, conferences, professional associations, national, international	2.24

*Weighted to correct for geographic representation

Actors as Drivers and Barriers to Sustainability Policy Development

The **top-ranked policy actors** identified as being most influential on sustainability uptake in policy development were **SDs (IIS = 3.11), school administrators (IIS = 2.92), and sustainability coordinators (IIS = 2.89)**. In the qualitative data, the most frequently referenced drivers were teachers, students, and SDs—ministries of education were not frequently mentioned as drivers, nor were provincial or federal levels of government. **Actors were also the second-most referenced barrier in the qualitative data**, with participants referencing “apathy” and a “lack of leadership” at all levels of the education system.

Existing Policies and Mandates Influence Policy Development

When asked about the role of other policies in supporting sustainability uptake in education policy development, participants indicated **existing policies within their work setting (IIS = 3.03) and SD-level policies (IIS = 3.02)** were most influential—higher than provincial policies (IIS = 2.68). In the qualitative data, participants commonly referenced **competing priorities** as barriers. For example, one participant noted, “sustainability may not be seen as the priority issue.”

Community Influences are Important Drivers of Sustainability Uptake

Participants indicated **supportive social values (66%), community expectations (58%), and community programs (57%)** as being influential in policy development. The qualitative data referenced **public pressure** as well as **local support** from individuals within the education system and the surrounding community as drivers.

Resources as the Primary Barrier to Policy Development

Resource deficits emerged in the qualitative data as the most commonly and clearly identified barrier, with approximately half of comments referring to financial and human resources as barriers to sustainability uptake in policy development.



Take Action

SEPN's survey provides policy actors working to incorporate sustainability in education policy with information about the types of actors, policies, networks, and community factors that may drive or hinder sustainability uptake during the policy development process.

Recommendation #1: Ministries of Education Should Better Engage School Divisions and Schools in Policy Development

- ✘ **Challenge:** Ministries of education play a central role in education policy development and are the main resource allocator in Canada's K-12 system. However, SEPN's survey suggests individuals working at the school and SD levels perceive schools and SDs to be the primary driver of policy development in those contexts—indicating a potential disconnect from ministry of education policy processes.
- ✔ **Action:** Policy actors working within ministries of education should consider ways to meaningfully engage with policy actors at the school and school division levels when developing policy to ensure broad support for policies being developed.

Recommendation #2: Take Advantage of Common Drivers and Attend to Common Barriers during Policy Development

- ✘ **Challenge:** Policy making in education is a complex process, requiring policy actors to balance competing priorities all vying for limited resources. SEPN's survey identified common barriers and facilitators that impact sustainability uptake in policy development.
- ✔ **Action:** SEPN's findings suggest local support within schools, SDs, and communities can play a key role in driving sustainability uptake in education policy. The survey also found policy actors often encounter apathetic attitudes and resource deficits when developing policy. Policy actors should capitalize on common drivers, and plan for likely barriers developing and enacting new policies within the education system.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
David Suzuki Foundation
Learning for a Sustainable Future
Sierra Youth Coalition

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Assembly of First Nations
Canadian Federation of Students
Global Youth Education Network
Métis National Council
Sustainability Solutions Group

28 Campus Drive
College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK Canada, S7N 0X1
www.sepn.ca

 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

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