

# SCALE MATTERS IN POLICY FLOWS

## A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF SUSTAINABILITY IN K-12 EDUCATION

**The Challenge:** In federated education settings such as Canada, schools operate under school, regional, provincial/territorial, national, and international policy directives. Relatively little attention has been paid to how policy flows in multiple directions across such scales, including how local priorities can work their way into policy at various levels. To address this gap, SEPN examined the complex dynamics of how policy flows amongst international, national, state, and sub-state levels.

**Main Findings:** SEPN found each level of policy is important in making it more likely there will be policy at subsequent 'lower' levels and that broader non-educational sustainability policy can play an important role in influencing sustainability uptake within the education system.

**Take Action:** SEPN's findings point to the importance of inclusion of sustainability in policy at sub-national scales, including in broader non-educational government policy. Policy actors working to improve sustainability uptake within the education system should aim to include sustainability at all levels of the education system using a whole institution approach, and should consider engaging with municipal and regional leadership outside of the education system to enhance sustainability uptake in education policy.

For full results see: McKenzie, M. & Aikens, K. (In Review). *The Interscalar Mobilities of Education Policy: A Comparative Case Study of Sustainability in K-12 Education*.

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### Tracing Policy Flows through a Comparative Case Study Approach

SEPN conducted a comparative case study in **6 provinces**, **10 school divisions (SDs)**, and **20 K-12 schools**, each with a range of characteristics. A total of **150 interviews**, **43 focus groups**, and **350 mini 'sidewalk interviews'** were collected with participants at the ministry, SD, and school levels. Policy documents were collected. SEPN used critical policy analysis to examine how **policy flows** including: (1) **vertically** across international, national, and sub-national levels; and (2) **horizontally**, for example via relationships between provinces.

### International and National Flows: The Dominance of the Education for Sustainable Development Frame

SEPN documented shifts in dominant terminology related to **United Nations (UN)** initiatives, highlighting the significance of the UN in framing sustainability in education globally. Specifically, SEPN found shifts from 'environment' to 'sustainable development,' as well as to 'sustainability.' Recent shifts to 'climate change' and 'global competencies' were also found.

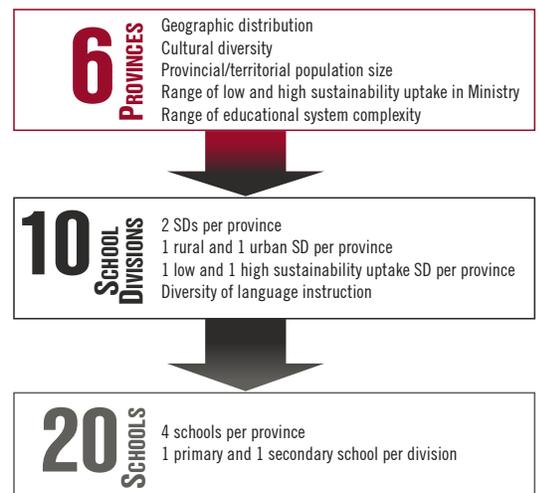
At the **national** level, SEPN's interview data suggested the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) had a strong focus on ESD during research, which led to ESD working groups within CMEC and many provinces. These relationships appear to have fostered considerable uptake of the ESD framing vertically among UNESCO, CMEC, and in the province of Manitoba in particular.

SEPN also found that while international mandates have had a large impact on the shape and scope of sustainability engagement in Canada, local priorities have played a role in shaping policy framings in some cases. SEPN found a lack of ESD framings in some provinces and territories, due to **resistance** in some cases (e.g., in Ontario, in which the term 'environmental education' predominated) and in others due to **isolation from policy flows or engagement with other priorities or framings** (i.e., in Nunavut where Indigenous land-based knowledge was key).

### Non-Educational Policy at Provincial, Regional, and Municipal Levels Influences Sustainability Uptake in the Education System

All provinces and territories had ministry of education policies addressing sustainability and most (British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Nunavut) had overarching governmental policies with sustainability-related legal requirements. **SEPN found broader provincial policy had a supportive or reciprocal relationship with policy at the ministry level:** 4 of the 6 provinces with broader environment-specific provincial acts had higher sustainability uptake at the provincial ministry of education level, as well as higher uptake SDs.

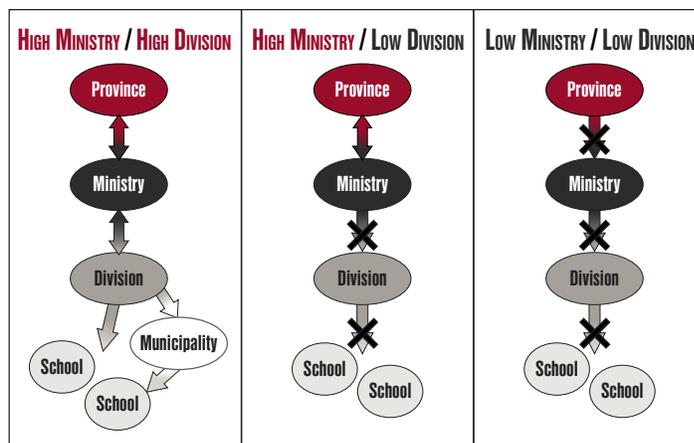
Municipal or regional policies outside of education also influenced policy at the SD level. In 2 of 3 urban SDs with sustainability policies, administrators referenced municipal or regional policies as influencing sustainability uptake (e.g., Vancouver's 'greenest city' municipal initiative impacted Vancouver School Board's sustainability commitments). In 3 rural regions, school staff, SD staff, and community members described a lack of municipal leadership as a barrier, suggesting local economic concerns often outweighed sustainability.



## Provincial and Ministry Engagement with Sustainability has an Impact on School Division Engagement

In SDs and schools with sustainability policies, there also tended to be policy engagement at the ministry level. Of the 10 SDs studied, 4 had policies supporting sustainability integration into planning and operations—all 4 of those SDs were in medium or high uptake ministry of education contexts. In all but one case, SD documents acknowledged ministry or broader provincial policies.

SEPN found most ministries of education focused on curriculum and most SDs focused on operations; however, 3 ministries of education (Manitoba, British Columbia, Ontario) used a **'whole institution'** framing, which includes incorporating sustainability in the domains of governance, research, curriculum, operations, and community engagement. SEPN observed **mutually reinforcing relationships** between ministry and SD policy with respect to whole-institution domains: if sustainability was included in a particular policy domain at both the ministry and SD levels, participants were more positive about policy in that domain, despite the domain having the same uptake level as other provinces.



SEPN also observed a **policy import stop** in some SDs where there was little sustainability engagement at the SD level despite considerable engagement at ministry of education and broader provincial levels. The data suggested **lack of motivation** to include new priorities and **lack of resources** were the primary barriers in these cases.

## School Division Leadership Supports School Sustainability Uptake

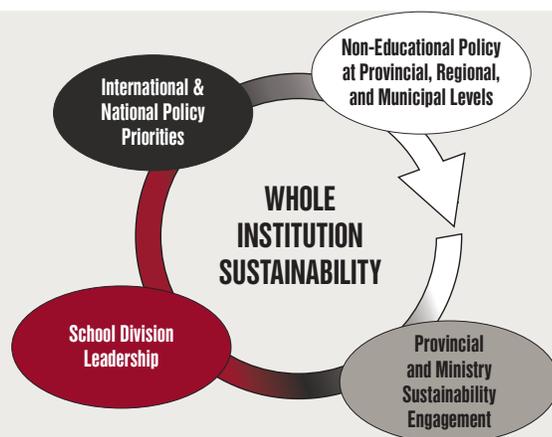
Five of the 20 schools in the study had formalized school plans and/or guideline documents that integrated sustainability into school priorities. In 3 cases where sustainability was articulated as a core focus for a school, administrators and staff pointed to **SD leadership** as playing a significant role in school level sustainability uptake.

## Take Action

SEPN's findings suggest local level policy may develop in different ways from national and global policy mandates, sometimes flowing up to influence broader policy discourses or approaches.

### Recommendation #1: Incorporate Sustainability in Education Policy at All Levels, Using a Whole Institution Approach

- ✘ **Challenge:** In the context of increasing centralization of educational administration at the SD level, this study suggests local level policy plays an important role in achieving or surpassing state-level policy aims. SEPN also found engagement with sustainability in education policy was often limited to curriculum or operations, with gaps in governance, research, and community engagement domains.
- ✔ **Action:** Policy actors should work to incorporate sustainability at all levels and in all domains within the education system in order to ensure sustainability uptake is maximized.



### Recommendation #2: Engage with Non-educational Policy to Improve Sustainability Uptake in the Education System

- ✘ **Challenge:** SEPN's findings suggest overarching provincial sustainability-related legal requirements can bolster sustainability uptake in the education system (e.g., emissions reductions required as part of broader government climate change initiatives).
- ✔ **Action:** Policy actors working within the education system could better engage with municipal and regional leadership to incorporate sustainability in broader government policy as a way of pushing forward education-based sustainability initiatives. Municipal and regional leaders should consider enacting general sustainability-related policy as a means of increasing sustainability uptake 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

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