

## Sustainability in Canadian K-12 Education: Closing the Research Gap on Understanding National Trends

Educational institutions are a critical venue for teaching and motivating students to understand and act on sustainability issues. In Canada, provincial or territorial ministries of education, working with local school divisions, are responsible for the organization, delivery, and assessment of K-12 education. To date, there has been little study of the inclusion of sustainability in education across Canada at the ministry of education or school division levels.

To address this gap in research, the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) conducted a nation-wide census to examine sustainability uptake in the policies of all 13 provincial and territorial ministries of education and all 389 registered K-12 school divisions (which also includes school districts and boards) across Canada. Full results can be read in the research paper: “Beveridge, D., McKenzie, M., Strobbe, K. M., Aikens, K. “Sustainability in Canadian K-12 Education: Reviewing Policy Initiatives Across School Divisions and Provincial Ministries of Education.”

### Ministry of Education Policies

The provincial and territorial ministries of education engage with sustainability issues through sustainability-specific policies and general curriculum frameworks.

#### Sustainability-specific policies fall into four domains.

In total seven provincial ministries have sustainability-specific high-level documents in one or more domains.

**Governance:** Four provinces have created sustainability-specific overall governance documents. In Manitoba and Quebec, these are the result of a government-wide mandate to address sustainable development. In Manitoba, for example, all school divisions fall under *The Sustainable Development Act* and therefore must adhere to sustainability guidelines mandated by the provincial government, with the support of the Ministry of Education.

**Curriculum:** Five provinces have one or more sustainability-specific documents focused on curriculum. While not using the terms “sustainability” or “environment,” the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have each produced curriculum guides based on traditional Inuit knowledge which have strong themes of cultural and environmental sustainability.

**Operations:** Three provinces have sustainability-specific operations documents: British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario.

**Research:** Three provinces have sustainability-specific research reports: Manitoba, Ontario, and the Yukon. These were produced in partnership with working groups, committees, or institutes.

#### Curriculum frameworks are used by most provinces.

All provinces except British Columbia had overarching frameworks that guide learning throughout elementary and secondary education that also include sustainability components. These frameworks are not ‘sustainability-specific’ (s-s) in focus; rather, they provide information on the prioritization of sustainability in relation to broader graduation outcomes and competencies.

Province	S-S Governance Documents	S-S Curriculum Documents	S-S Operations Documents	S-S Research Documents	Sustainability in Curriculum Framework
AB	No	No	No	No	Yes
BC	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
MB	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NB/NL/NS/PE	No	No	No	No	Yes
NT	No	Yes	No	No	N/A
NU	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
ON	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A
QC	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
SK	No	No	No	No	Yes
YT	No	No	No	Yes	N/A

### School Division Policies

#### EcoSchools are more likely to have sustainability-specific policies.

120 school divisions (31%) had undertaken some form of sustainability certification. Most used either EcoSchools or Brundtland Schools certification. EcoSchools was used exclusively in Ontario: 64% of its school divisions had EcoSchools. Brundtland Schools were mainly in

Québec, where 90% of school divisions had Brundtland Schools. 96% of school divisions with EcoSchools had sustainability-specific policies. In comparison, only 51% of school districts without EcoSchool certification had policies. School divisions having Brundtland certifications tended not to have policies.

### Sustainability staff are in very few school divisions.

Only 33 of Canada's 389 school divisions (8%) had sustainability staff. Of note was that all of New Brunswick's seven school divisions had staff focused on sustainability efforts; and school divisions with sustainability staff tended to have more policies.

### Over half of Canada's school divisions have sustainability-specific policies.

Of Canada's 389 K-12 school divisions, 224 (57%) had policies with a focus on sustainability. Policy adoption varied across provinces, with Ontario having the highest (71 of 83, or 86% of school divisions), and Yukon and Nunavut having the lowest with no policies. Of a total of 310 policies across the schools divisions, none were research policies, 3% were community outreach policies, 27% were curriculum policies, 29% were governance policies, and 52% were operations policies.

Sustainability Initiative Scores by Provincial Average	
ON	1.64
NB	1.29
QC	1.19
BC	0.78
SK	0.73
NS	0.67
MB	0.50
PE	0.50
NL	0.50
NT	0.38
YT	0.20
NU	0.0

(Average of scores of school divisions in a province. Each school division gets 1 point for each of the three sustainability initiatives they have (eco-certification, staff, policy) with a possible range of 0-3)

### School Division Sustainability Initiatives by Province

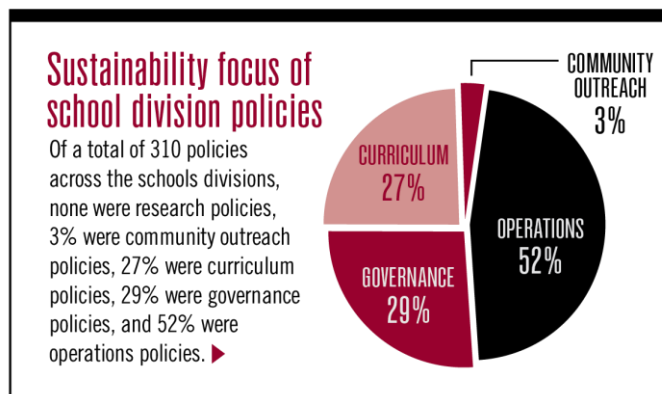
	ON	QC	NB	NS	PE	NL	YT	NT	NU	CA				
# of School Divisions with S-S Policies	41	45	19	17	71	19	1	6	1	1	0	3	0	224
# of School Divisions with Eco-certification	1	1	0	0	53	63	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	120
# of School Divisions with Sustainability Staff	7	3	1	1	12	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	33
# of School Divisions	60	74	28	37	83	70	7	9	2	2	5	8	4	389

### Operations policies are the majority of sustainability-specific policies.

162 policies focused on operations. Almost a half of all operations policies focused on either waste (76 policies) or energy (75 policies). 20 policies focused on climate change. The overrepresentation of operations policies was most marked in Atlantic Canada, where no division had policies focused on curriculum, governance, research, or outreach. Nova Scotia had the highest percentage of school divisions with operations policies at 67%; Saskatchewan had the lowest at 18%.

### Most school divisions use 'environment' in their policy titles.

'Environment' is the dominant language used in school division policy titles across the country. Although in Manitoba, 'sustainable development' was more commonly used, and in Québec, 'développement durable' ('sustainable development') was used.



### Sustainability-specific policies increase after 2006.

Sustainability-specific school division policy dates followed a distinct temporal trend, with few policy dates before 2006, a rapid increase until 2010, and a slow decline to the present. Only 80 policies were dated between 1978 and 2005. 189 policies were dated between 2006 and 2014.

There has been a steady increase in uptake of sustainability in K-12 education over the past decade. However these research results suggest that more can be done both at the ministry of education and school division levels to further mobilize knowledge and solutions that enable change for a more sustainable future. 🌱

#### SEPN 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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