

K-12 ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS: BUILDING GREENER SCHOOLS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CITIZENS

Environmental certification programs for K-12 schools are growing in use across Canada. These programs promote the value of environmental education, help schools and divisions make more environmentally-friendly choices, and reward schools that reach goals or benchmarks along the way. This research brief outlines a study by the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) reviewing Canadian eco-certification programs, including their characteristics and benefits.

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Program Characteristics

Certification programs are created by groups ranging from provincial governments to non-profit organizations. Once a school enrolls in an environmental certification program, they receive a package of materials detailing the steps to reach environmental goals: for example, how to become certified, how to integrate environmental concepts into curricula, and tips on how to become more sustainable in energy, waste, and school grounds areas.

The programs discussed below are a sample of the environmental certification programs available for K-12 schools across Canada. All programs presented here are provincial or country-wide; programs that operate on an individual school division level may not be represented here. There are also many programs in Canada that provide curriculum support and other resources to increase sustainability, but that do not offer certification or a rewards program.

Focus Areas

1. Helping the environment: energy and water conservation, reduction of waste and consumption, or protecting or enhancing nature.
2. Sustainable education: outdoor schools, environmental education for teachers, teamwork and leadership programs.

Many of the certification programs also note the importance of branching out from the school and including the larger community in environmental initiatives.

Online Resources

The certification programs outlined here provide online environments to share activity ideas and successes, as well as troubleshoot with other schools or divisions. Websites also provide a place for the program to post resource manuals and program guides, provide information on upcoming events, and provide links to other resources or information on grants. Some websites offer information on training opportunities, and in the case of provinces with sustainability curriculum mandates, offer documents that help teachers link the certification program with curriculum goals.

Student Engagement

The goal of many of these certification programs is to educate future environmental leaders, making student engagement a key part of the programs. Student-led projects, student conferences and workshops, and other student leadership opportunities help ensure that students are getting value out of these programs. For example, BC's Green School program holds the BC Green Games annually, a student competition designed to motivate students and showcase environmental ideas.

Rewards

Across the certification programs, schools that reach a certain goal receive an accolade in the form of a certificate, plaque, or recognition on the program website. These rewards can be granted for participating in activities related to any of the focus areas above. There are numerous levels to each program, representing varying levels of achievement. Results are published on the program websites, so that other schools can see success stories and get project ideas.



Programs in Canada

Alberta Green Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Alberta Chapter of Green Schools, led by partners SEEDS and the Alberta Council for Environmental Education Provides additional resources for Alberta schools, including workshops
British Columbia Green Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership between British Columbia's Ministry of Education and British Columbia's Climate Action Secretariat All public schools in British Columbia are involved in some capacity
Établissement vert Brundtland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes K-12 schools as well as early childhood and adult education centers, vocational training centers, and office buildings Over 1200 schools enrolled in Quebec, 3 in New Brunswick, and 1 in the Yukon
Destination Conservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools become involved in a six-year, intensive program and track their progress through various conservation
Eco-Globe Schools Manitoba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An annual recognition program for elementary and secondary schools that promote education for sustainable initiatives 27 schools were Eco-Globe schools in 2013
Green Schools Nova Scotia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed by Efficiency Nova Scotia and administered by Impact Communications Group 109 schools registered, with over 17,000 actions taken
Ontario Eco-Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1,745 public schools across Ontario are certified, including 52 French schools A comprehensive program targeting energy conservation, waste management, school ground greening, and environmental stewardship
SEEDS Green Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over one million projects completed to date ram websites in August 2014. Over 6,000 schools have participated across Canada

Note: Data collected from program websites in August 2014.

The Benefits of Environmental School Certification Programs

There is little third-party Canadian research on environmental school certification programs. Research on certification programs outside of Canada have resulted in a body of literature that identifies the benefits of environmental school certification programs.

Environmental Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community strengthening through joint initiatives such as vegetable gardens or waste free lunch programs Enhanced biodiversity from green school grounds Increased school aesthetics Reduction of school's ecological footprint
Educational Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Healthier students – socially, mentally, and behaviorally Increase in student and teacher awareness of environmental issues and stewardship Richer curriculum Process of certification can lead to a new, collaborative vision for the school Professional development and leadership opportunities for students and teachers Whole-school participation and community ownership
Economic Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Savings due to reduced water and energy consumption due to various activities Savings from reduced amount of waste due to recycling initiatives

Conclusion

There are many environmental certification programs for K-12 schools across Canada. The majority of these programs operate only in one province or territory; only SEEDS Green Schools has schools certified across Canada. Notably, Saskatchewan and the Maritime provinces (with the exception of Nova Scotia) are lacking programs targeted to their provinces. The Northern regions of Canada also lack a strong program presence. The largest and perhaps most successful programs (in terms of participation and impact) are linked to provincial governments (British Columbia Green Schools and Ontario EcoSchools). More research is certainly necessary to determine the exact benefits these environmental certifications have on schools, students, and the environment.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
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CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Assembly of First Nations
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Global Youth Education Network
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