

# TURNING GREEN

## The transition to a sustainable future

**T**wenty-five years ago, I graduated from an independent school for girls. Looking back, I wonder what being a “green school” would have meant then. Apart from our green uniforms, I am not sure the topic of environmental sustainability ever really entered the lexicon. Fortunately, times have changed!

Does your school have a vision for how it can contribute to education for sustainable development in the 21st century? As we approach the mid-point of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, which spans 2005 to 2014, schools around the world are working to integrate sustainability considerations within their operations and facilities, curriculum, community service programs, school life and professional development activities.

Several independent schools in Ontario have embarked on their own different journeys to become greener in all senses of the word. They have in common the goal of becoming schools that embody the values of environmental stewardship, contribute to sustainable development by acting locally to reduce environmental impacts, and, perhaps most importantly, to become places where young people can learn about new ways to live lightly on this Earth. ▀

### By Stephanie Foster

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For the purposes of this article, I am using the term “green school” to mean a school that is committed to demonstrating leadership in terms of education for sustainable development. I have placed less emphasis on the “nuts and bolts” of becoming a green school and more on strategies to ensure that a school’s greening efforts lead to long-lasting institutional change.

board of governors. This also engenders a sense among the school community that going green is a serious undertaking for the school and not just another fad that will fade in ensuing years.

Principals also need to consider how to give an issue like education for sustainable development the predominance it deserves over successive strategic plans without losing its newness.

Most of the schools I have worked with have included environmental sustainability into their strategic plans. Most notably, Hillfield Strathallan College in Hamilton, Ontario, identified environmental sustainability as one of its three core pillars. At Upper Canada College in Toronto, Ontario, one facet of the strategic plan is to nurture character development and produce “global citizens,” prepared to make a real difference in the world. Enmeshed in core curriculum, values such as environmental sustainability and long-term environmental stewardship are presented as key components of strong character. Other schools such as Ridley College in St. Catharines, Ontario, and Branksome Hall in Toronto included environmental sustainability part of their strategic plans.



## A CORNERSTONE OF ANY SCHOOL'S ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY ACTION PLAN SHOULD BE TO REDUCE GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS, ALSO KNOWN AS ITS CARBON FOOTPRINT

Also, as an environmental consultant, not a teacher, my focus is more on project management and informal education issues rather than on the curricular aspects of education for sustainable development. But every aspect of greening makes excellent learning in the classroom.

### **Leadership Commitment**

One lesson I learned early on was the benefit of having strong and consistent leadership to successfully make the shift to becoming a green school. The principal must be the champion of the school’s environmental commitments and be prepared to stand by them during the tough times that are bound to arise when questions arise about how to balance the environmental aspects of sustainability with the financial aspects. I believe that the principal should be knowledgeable about the challenges of sustainability, have a good understanding of ecological literacy and be able to explain to anyone who asks what they believe education for sustainable development means.

Another strategy for success is to make a commitment to education for sustainable development in the school’s mission statement or at least in its strategic plan. This “ratification” demonstrates that environmental sustainability is a core value. It also means that someone has to be accountable, either through the leadership team or, in some cases, the

### **Climate change leadership**

Schools around the world are recognizing the need to be part of the solution to climate change. A cornerstone of any school’s environmental sustainability action plan should be to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, also known as its carbon footprint. While educating students about the causes and effects of climate change, and teaching them how they can help to make the societal changes necessary to address this issue is important. It is also critical for schools to work to reduce their own carbon footprint.

Not only are schools realizing the environmental benefits, but they are also reaping the economic benefits associated with reduced utility costs. Schools may take advantage of existing programs to get financial incentives and technical assistance to help with their energy retrofit programs.

### **Taking a “systems approach”**

Any temptation to think that school greening initiatives should focus only on facilities and operations is misguided. As the notion of sustainable development itself shows us, we need to understand the concept of “systems thinking—that is, we must recognize the linkages between ecosystems, economics and social equity. Or, in “school speak,” we need to recognize the linkages between a school’s environmental impacts, its financial viability and impacts and its social impacts (academics and culture).

Every school is a system, from the buildings that provide healthy learning environments and meet program and academic needs, to the way schools consume and produce waste, to what is being taught in the classroom, and informally in the hallways. It is only by recognizing this interdependence that any effort to become a green school will succeed.

**Building buy-in**

A successful green school plan will engage diverse members of the school community from the start. I recommend that schools ask for input and ideas early on to help build buy-in and a sense of ownership. Along with this, the principal will often need to find ways to free up time for those involved. As we all know, the common and understandable issues of “not enough time,” and people already feeling over-loaded by existing demands will come to the fore.

Consider how you can involve teachers, administrators and support staff, as well as staff from facilities and operations, whether in-house or contractors. While some people will be more inclined to come on board and actively support the sustainability initiative, it is important to open up participation to others. A team-building approach will increase chances of developing a realistic environmental sustainability action plan. This is also a good strategy for breaking down the

traditional boundary between faculty and students on the one hand, and staff and administrators on the other.

A pleasing side-effect of this approach is the possibility of revealing “sustainability champions” in your midst. In particular, I have found that this process empowers facilities and maintenance staff, who often work behind the scenes, to come up with their own constructive greening ideas.

**Creating leadership opportunities**

To truly become a green school, everyone needs to develop a personal sense of environmental stewardship—students, teachers and staff. And, in an environment where the population cycles through on a regular basis with students graduating and teachers moving on, we need to find ways to maintain and renew the school’s collective knowledge about environmental sustainability. Creating ongoing leadership opportunities is one way to achieve this end.

For most schools, cultivating student leadership is a core element of what they do. Often environmental sustainability leadership opportunities are woven into existing school programs such as in student government through the prefects program, in community service and/or in clubs and extracurricular activities. I suggest that schools should also look for ways to weave environmental sustainability into other aspects of school life. For example, a growing trend among boarding schools is to have House ▶



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eco-reps, who can act as a resource to their peers on ways to “green” while living in residence. This is also a great way for students to learn first-hand about how to live more sustainable lifestyles.

Providing teachers and staff with opportunities to lead is also important. This can be done by creating a part-time sustainability co-ordinator position for someone to work with students and the administration on the sustainability action plan. Upper Canada College provides opportunities for two to three teachers to be “Sustainability Fellows,” with some time freed up from teaching to work on special sustainability projects. There are also a growing number of special professional development opportunities related to education for sustainable development available that should be promoted. Recognizing leadership is another way to inspire leadership. Consider putting in place an Environmental Leadership or “Green Star” award to annually acknowledge individuals who have contributed significantly to the school community’s greening efforts and/or demonstrated best practices.

### Special sustainability projects

Although I recommend taking a systems approach, it is also important to select one or two priorities on which to focus, at least initially. One of the priorities could be a discrete but special project to maintain excitement and enthusiasm and to act as a rallying ground for the community. Successful projects should be inspiring and stimulate the curiosity of youth and adults alike to learn more about how they can help society make the transition to a sustainable future.

Ideally such a project builds on a school’s existing strengths and competencies and has a champion who can manage the project and ensure that it retains its relevance to the school. Look for people who are already aligned with the school’s environmental sustainability priorities. It might be a grounds manager who wants to build a campus garden, a teacher looking for some time to work with others to integrate sustainability into the curriculum, a facilities manager who wants to learn about and implement green building practices or a group of students

who want to get a source of renewable energy on site. The project does not have to be grandiose, but should be meaningful and attainable.

### Walking the talk

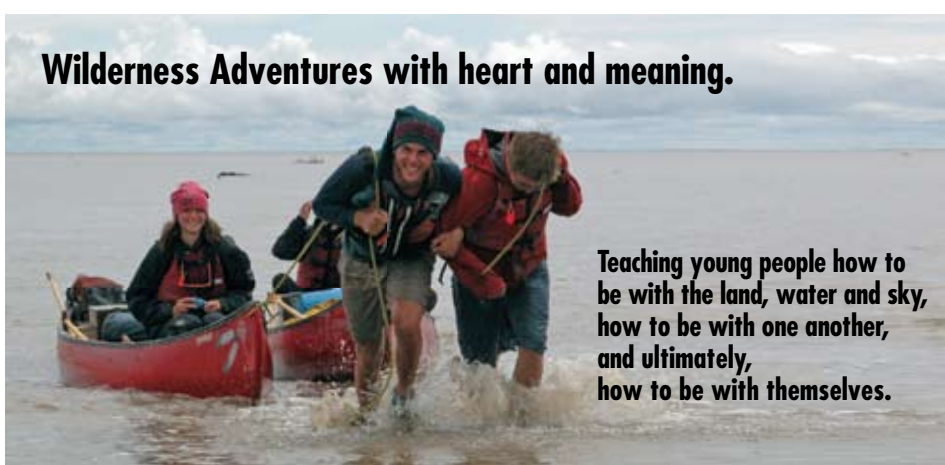
The truth is, it can be a challenge for a school to maintain the initial momentum and enthusiasm around its efforts to become a green school. In my experience, one of the best strategies for achieving enduring change is to always be looking for ways to integrate environmental thinking into everything a school does. Achieving the real culture shift toward a sustainable future means that schools must walk the talk.

I cannot emphasize enough the value of ongoing communications when making the transition to becoming a truly green school. That means regular and ongoing updates to the school community to keep the issue of environmental sustainability front of mind, using traditional vehicles such as on the school’s website, the principal’s letters to parents, annual reports, alumni magazines and newsletters.

Creative schools should look for ways to graft the environmental sustainability message into everything they do and say. Environmental initiatives should not be relegated to only one week in April. Every day should be Earth Day.

More significantly, this needs to be done by walking the talk, ensuring that the “hidden curriculum” matches what your school is saying in terms of its environmental sustainability commitments. What kind of a message does it send to students if a school is talking about becoming a green school but is trying to cut corners by serving food on disposable serviceware at special events, expanding parking lots, allowing idling in front of the school, encouraging international service trips rather than locally based community service or offering non vegetarian (low carbon) meals?

It is only by linking the core values of environmental stewardship to everyday life in the school that we can truly engender ecological citizenship in our students. Ultimately, this approach creates the strong connection that is needed between green school goals at the pedagogical level and a school’s environmental performance. ●



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