

# Promoting Sustainability in Canadian Schools

Schools in Canada are stepping up and making sustainability a priority. Learn how SBOs and students are becoming environmental stewards.

Listening, comprehending, and acting are three attributes of successful sustainability and resiliency in Canadian schools. As the provinces have embarked on considerable new school construction, architect Heather Bretz and her associates at Stantec, a global sustainable engineering, architecture, and environmental consulting firm, are rebuilding First Nations communities' schools.

“The biggest lesson we have taken from design for Indigenous schools is about the importance of listening, building trust, and forging deep relationships,” Bretz says. “For those relationships are deep enough that laughter can become a feature of the design process where mistrust once existed.”



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*Elizabeth Quintal School at Peerless Lake, Alberta, reflects input from the chief, council, elders, and the larger community.*

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Bretz and her design team built the K-8 Elizabeth Quintal School at Peerless Lake, Alberta, collaborating closely with the chief, council, elders, and the larger community to learn about the community history and their experiences with education.

“As you walk past the teepee entry, the building opens into a large gathering space used for education and community events,” Bretz explains. “Adorned on the wall are the Seven Sacred Animals, pillars of Cree teaching, while the floor represents Peerless Lake, allowing students to point out their homes along the shoreline.

Bretz says her team incorporated suggestions from the students during the design phase of the project. “They wanted a second story to their new school — with stairs, because all the community buildings were one level.

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## **Students as Mentors**

Frequently, it is the adults who need to do the listening, as young people have important things to say. “We believe the key to becoming a more sustainable society starts with a well-educated school,” according to eighth-grade students from Leo Baeck Day School in Toronto.

For their Grade 8 Community Project, students chose to focus on single-use plastics and how they harm marine life. “We advocated for this cause by talking to the school’s Grade 4 students with a fun challenge: creating a plastic-free lunchbox. By doing this, we reduced the school's waste output and began the process of molding a sustainable mindset in our fellow students,” the eighth graders said. “The fourth graders were open-minded and overall incredible. They learned from the presentation and had fun during the challenge.”

Whether it's rebuilding First Nations communities' schools or participating in a Toronto day school classroom community project, listening, comprehending, and taking action are crucial to the organization's success.

## **School Business Officials as Environmental Stewards**

Approximately five million K-12 students attend school in one of four Canadian school jurisdictions: Local School Division, Charter School, First Nation School Authority, or an Independent School as recognized by the provincial authorities. The [Ontario Association of School Business Officials](#) has a long-standing and active 30-member Environment and Sustainability Committee that meets virtually or in-person, monthly.

In addition, the association's publication *The Advocate* features member-written articles that showcase their roles as environmental stewards. Recent topics have included "The Importance of Water Conservation Efforts at School Boards" (Spring/Summer 2024), "Realizing the Potential of School Grounds" (Spring/Summer 2023), and "Organizing and Hosting School Board Eco Conferences" (Spring/Summer 2025).

## **Sustainability and Resiliency as Wellness**

Sustainability also includes the wellness of students, parents, and staff. Architect Stephen Turckes at Perkins Will writes in [Spaces4Learning](#), "Contrary to widespread belief, resilience isn't just about preparing for and protecting against climate change-related stressors. It's also about economic and social stressors. As school designers, we must also take into account the daily stressors that impact students' personal resilience — issues like safety and security, homelessness, hunger, income disparities, and healthcare inequities. When we do that, we can help schools be more successful."

Twenty-five years ago, Aubrey Kirkpatrick, director of finance for the Anglophone East School District in New Brunswick, started doing just that. In New Brunswick, one in three children live with food insecurity, which has risen by over 5% since 2022, with some families struggling to meet basic needs due to increasing costs.

Kirkpatrick saw students coming to school without breakfast or lunch and, in response, started the Fill the Bus campaign. Students, staff, and the wider community participate by donating nonperishable food items for local food banks and school food programs.



*Photo courtesy of Anglophone East School District.*

*For 25 years, Anglophone East School District in New Brunswick has coordinated a Fill the Bus campaign to help feed students and the larger community.*

## **Concluding Observation**

Sustainability is thriving in Canadian schools, thanks in part to our ASBO colleagues, other education partners, and vendor affiliates. Their resolve, demonstrated through listening, comprehending, and acting, has been commendable.

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