

The Importance of Community Collaboration:
*Strategies for Encouraging Youth Engagement in
Sustainable Practices*

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Land Acknowledgement

The City of Tkaronto is on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The City also acknowledges that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

The history of Toronto begins approximately 12,500 years ago at the end of the Ice Age with the withdrawal of the ice sheet from the area of present-day Toronto. Soon afterward groups of Indigenous people moved into the area and established connections and relationships with the land, the waterways and the wildlife of the area.

As centuries passed and generations of people have moved into and out of the region, the City of Toronto has grown into the fourth largest city in North America and is now home to people from communities all over the world. Planning for our sustainable future as a city and as a community, we consider Toronto's history and how we can celebrate traditional knowledge and heritage while embracing growth.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project is directed by three Master of Public Policy candidates (Zexi Fan, Gurminder Kaur Sandal, and Catherine Shi) and a Master of Global Affairs candidate (Maya Gandhi), under the supervision of Professor John Robinson in GLA2029 – The Sustainability Imperative: Implications for Global Affairs and Public Policy. In the context of Toronto’s climate strategy, TransformTO, this project seeks to explore community engagement and participatory process in the service of sustainable outcomes. Specifically, it examines how to engage citizens effectively in sustainability decision-making, which falls under one of the Munk School’s four Focal Areas: The Future of Democratic Societies.

To complete this project, academic and grey literature were reviewed and jurisdictional scans of sustainability programming within Toronto and across the world were conducted. The findings highlighted a need to introduce sustainability programming that cultivates a stronger connection between youth and their surrounding community, with a specific focus on building relationships with the top decision makers within the region. As such, the group decided to focus on how to foster a sustainability mindset among Toronto’s youth community through empowering youths to revitalize and lead a sustainability education program.

This project is significant because Toronto City Council has adopted an ambitious strategy to reduce community-wide greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in Toronto to net zero by 2040. The need to tackle sustainability related issues such as climate change is more pressing than ever, making it critical to incorporate a sustainability mindset into Toronto’s youth community as they are our future. With the recommendations proposed, the City of Toronto can play an essential role in driving a culture of sustainability. Beyond that, we note that institutional barriers exist and mitigations are required by the City of Toronto if it is to become a leader in the realm of sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging youth involvement towards sustainable practices is critical to the design and implementation of TransformTO's Net Zero Strategy. The City of Toronto deems youth voices critical from an equity perspective and recognizes the potential benefits from this group's innovative thinking. Consequently, the City of Toronto's Environment & Energy Division is in the process of improving and encouraging youth engagement under Strategy 20 of TransformTO's 2022-2025 Short-term Implementation Plan.

Education plays a vital role in contributing to sustainable community development. Quality education on sustainable practices can enforce a sense of responsibility and enables youth to contribute their vision for a sustainable future. Nevertheless, the Ontario curriculum is struggling to integrate sustainability education due to a lack of time, classroom resources, and professional knowledge. Having educational discussions and encouraging innovative thinking to strengthen youth voices is important for the future well-being of Toronto. It is therefore essential to introduce additional sustainability initiatives that help youth acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to shape a sustainable city. With this in mind, this report will address the following research question: ***What educational strategies can TransformTO pursue within its current youth engagement strategy to further ingrain sustainable practices into Toronto's community culture?***¹

Methodology

This project incorporates reviews of both academic and grey literature. Using qualitative research methods, this report addresses the research question above through the following steps:

1. Research why youth engagement is critical to sustainability work.

Research studies and statistics show the reason why engaging youth in sustainability programs is critical and can yield beneficial outcomes.

2. Analyze the current sustainability programs that are offered to youth in Toronto and abroad through conducting jurisdictional scans.

Two jurisdictional scans are conducted to analyze the four current sustainability programs offered in Toronto and three sustainability programs offered in Chicago, New Zealand/Australia, and San Francisco, respectively. Selection of foreign programs is based on the program's feasibility in Toronto.

3. Recognize the gaps in the current programs.

Through the analysis of existing programs in Toronto, three gaps are identified to demonstrate what is missing and what can be improved. This guides the preceding analysis.

4. Create success criteria for our proposed recommendations based on the current program offerings and gaps within them.

¹ The use of the term "youth" in this report refers to individuals between the ages of 15-30 as per Statistics Canada's categorization. The term "young people" will be used interchangeably with "youth".

Based on the existing programs offered in Toronto, the gaps identified, and the foreign sustainability programs discussed in the jurisdictional scan, four criteria for success are developed to reflect the foundation for future programs to be successful.

5. Draft recommendations to help the City of Toronto better engage youth in sustainability programming.

Four recommendations are created to address the current gaps in programs in Toronto from different angles, ranging from giving youth more decision-making power to providing informative material to educators.

6. Identify the risks for the proposed recommendations.

Following the recommendations, risks associated with the proposed recommendations are examined to present a comprehensive analysis to the City of Toronto.

Overall Goal

The outcome of this methodology will identify feasible strategies to increase youth engagement in sustainable practices in Toronto communities. The findings will be a presentation and a final report, including specific recommendations for the City of Toronto.

Key Messages

This paper aims to communicate the following key messages:

1. Youth engagement is critical to achieving sustainability goals.
2. A missing component of the current sustainability programming for youth is the connection with key regional decision-makers. This is crucial to allowing youth to enact their sustainability solutions and become motivated to continue in this line of work.
3. It is important to propose innovative and creative recommendations for youth engagement to ensure that as many barriers to engagement as possible are avoided.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: WHY IT MATTERS

With many of the current sustainability strategies and policies requiring several years before they reap the anticipated results, youths will inherit the environmental challenges that we face today. However, they are not passively accepting the issues as they are. Instead, they are acting as innovators, activists and voices of progress to solve these challenges.²

Creating more opportunities for youth engagement in sustainability practices will cultivate more innovative perspectives, improving future decision-making, policy recommendations, and programming. Youth engagement strategies can also improve confidence among youths and increase interest in the

² United Nations. 2022. Youth2030 Progress Report. Retrieved from http://www.wydf.org.cn/en/SDG_Youth/reports_on_youth/202206/P020220609625706932019.pdf.

government's sustainability initiatives. In addition, based on Statistics Canada's Portrait of Youth in Canada: Data Report on Youth and the Environment³, it appears that Canadian youth have expressed a strong interest in environmental issues and are inclined to engage in environmental sustainability activities:

- Canadian youth aged 15 to 30 volunteered more hours with environmental organizations and donated a slightly larger proportion of their charitable donations to environmental organizations in comparison to other age groups.
- Canadian youth identified climate change as a key issue, and the majority of youth (62%) agreed that Canada has an obligation to lead on initiatives to address climate change. Young adults in Canada appear to be more concerned about environmental issues than older adults.
- Households with older adults, youth and children present had the highest volunteer rate for these activities, at 27%. Households comprising older adults and no youth or children had a slightly lower volunteer rate of 19%.

Therefore, engaging youths in climate action is crucial to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills and to provide them the platform to voice their concerns and create solutions.

KEY FINDINGS: TORONTO'S EXISTING PROGRAMS

This section provides an analysis of 4 of Toronto's existing programs related to environmental and sustainability education for youth groups.

Government: The City of Toronto's Offerings

Summer Eco Camp⁴

The City of Toronto's Children's Eco Programs educate Toronto's children, youth and community members about environmental, physical and social health. They provide curriculum-based school programs, summer Eco Camps, youth cooking programs, free family drop-ins and free community events. The pricing for camp spots begin at \$225/camper/week.

While this price is lower than the average weekly price for day camps in Toronto⁵, it is still an expensive cost to incur for a basic environmental education, especially if children attend the camp for more than one week. Further, the camp has consistent offerings for children up to age 12, whereas the 13-15 age group only has an opportunity to attend the camp for 2 out of the 8 weeks.

³ Statistics Canada. 2022. Portrait of youth in Canada: Data report. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/42-28-0001/422800012021001-eng.htm>.

⁴ City of Toronto. N.d. Summer 2023 Eco Camp. Retrieved from: <https://childrensecoprograms.ca/2023-summer-eco-camp/>.

⁵ Camps.ca. N.d. Day camps. Retrieved from: https://www.camps.ca/day_camps.php.

*Live Green Toronto*⁶

Live Green Toronto is a hub for “all things environmental” that can be found on the City of Toronto website. It provides links to information on: the climate crisis, net zero homes and buildings, low-carbon transportation, and reducing and diverting waste. The website also has a video that communicates to viewers how they can “#TransformTO together!”.

While Live Green Toronto is a good website to have bookmarked, it is not interactive nor is it particularly engaging. Rather, it acts as a brief encyclopedia for environmentally-related subjects instead of as a tool that can be used to help engrain a sustainability mindset within its users.

Community: The Offerings Beyond the Local Government

*Sustainable Youth Canada*⁷

Sustainable Youth Canada (SYC) is a registered non-profit that provides a space for high school and university students to lead and engage with environmental and energy sustainability. SYC is present in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, with all regions hosting their own youth-led initiatives. SYC Toronto has hosted forums at Toronto private schools, attended conferences as an organization, and even partnered with other local environmental organizations to offer unique sustainability-focused volunteer opportunities for SYC members. to host events. Interested individuals can sign up for SYC on their website and can attend all programming offerings as they wish.

This program is free and operates based on youth connection, making it a great way for young people to become involved with the sustainability mission. However, SYC is mostly conference and event based and does not brand itself as an educational organization. It is also not extremely well-known, meaning that it is unable to capture the full population of young people interested in sustainability work.

*Peel Environmental Youth Alliance*⁸

The Peel Environmental Youth Alliance (PEYA) assists students and teachers from grades 6-12 who are looking to create sustained environmental change in their schools and local communities. It is a youth-initiated regional network of over 1400 students in the Peel District. PEYA focuses on education and community participation.

This program sets a strong example for how empowered youth groups can create change within larger systems such as the Peel District School Board. PEYA operates on a system of having older youth help younger youth to create positive environmental change, motivating both age groups to lead and support sustainability projects.

⁶ City of Toronto. N.d. Live Green Toronto. Retrieved from: <https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/water-environment/live-green-toronto/>.

⁷ Sustainable Youth Canada. N.d. Toronto. Retrieved from: <https://www.sustainableyouthcanada.com/toronto>.

⁸ Peel Environmental Youth Alliance. N.d. About. Retrieved from: <https://peyalliance.ca/about/>.

The gaps in the current programs

Based on the above analysis, we identified several gaps in Toronto's existing programs that demonstrate the need for stronger programming focussed on ingraining a sustainability mindset into Toronto's youth.

1. Lack of equity & accessibility: Economic barriers and limited offerings make the above programs inaccessible to individuals in certain age groups, those who come from lower-income backgrounds, and those who are differently abled. The programs also do not place a focus on fostering engagement within diverse communities, which can result in a lack of understanding of the unique sustainability challenges faced by different communities and limit the effectiveness of the program.

2. Lack of emphasis on community-building: The above programs are missing a key focus on how community building can support efforts to combat climate change. With some of the programs being virtual, participants and users are left out of engaging conversations with diverse groups of people that can help solidify a commitment to sustainable practices.

3. Lack of communication between youth groups and key regional decision-makers: While the above programs place a focus on educating young people on environmental and sustainable topics, they do not create channels for communication between youth and prominent decision-makers within the region. It is important for youth to understand how to bring change to their communities as these processes can often be complex and difficult to navigate.

Overall, Toronto could foster a more inclusive, accessible, and community-driven approach to building a sustainability mindset within the youth population by filling in the gaps in current programs stated above. A feeling of empowerment and ownership among younger generations can be fostered through more comprehensive youth engagement programs, which is essential for bringing about long-lasting change.

KEY FINDINGS: JURISDICTIONAL SCANS

Chicago, IL, U.S.A.⁹

The Phoenix Sustainability Initiative is a student-led organization at the University of Chicago. It attempts to introduce sustainable practices on campus and in the community. One part of the initiative is "Environmental Education." Initiated in 2019, Environmental Education's members interact with Chicago public and charter school students (K-12) through the Neighborhood Schools program to spread sustainability awareness and pursuable actions. Aside from providing education through lectures on sustainability, food security, and natural gardening, this initiative attempts to encourage pro-environmental behaviour by providing students with hands-on activities and resources required to carry out sustainable living practices. For example, students at one school participated in a bean sprout activity where they regularly measured their plant's growth and planted them in their school garden.

⁹ Phoenix Sustainability initiative At The University Of Chicago. 2023. Environmental education. Retrieved from: <https://www.psiuchicago.com/environmental-education>

Another school participated in water testing activities, where the chemical properties of various water bodies in Hyde Park were tested.

Having public school youth learn directly from other youth as opposed to adults is the organization's strategy of encouraging sustainable practices. The youth are more open to asking questions, engaging in discussions, and viewing the organization members as role models. Likewise, the teaching can be personalized to areas in which the youth live. This is evident by an activity where the organization uses water bodies near the school to perform sustainability activities. By doing interactive activities with areas that students are familiar with, this practice turns awareness into pro-environmental behavior.

New Zealand and Australia¹⁰

The Solar Schools program provides schools with curriculum-aligned lessons, activities, and monitoring products that promote energy efficiency. Since its introduction, 855 schools across New Zealand and Australia have participated in the program. The schools are given energy meters that record live consumption and energy generation data. This data is accessible through an online portage page that students can use to track, visualize, and analyze their school's energy efficiency. Students are encouraged to pursue energy-saving strategies and monitor their success using the data. Teachers are provided with a comprehensive toolkit that can be used to educate students about science, technology, and engineering topics revolving around energy efficiency. There are detailed plans and activities provided for grades 1 to 12. Overall, the program makes it easy for teachers to educate and for students to act on energy efficiency.

By educating students using real-time energy data, the program creates lasting behavioural change and inspires action. As students design energy-saving strategies and use energy meters to measure their effectiveness, students directly see the impacts of pursuing sustainability practices. Likewise, providing teachers with guidance on how to educate students about energy efficiency helps those who have no background or knowledge of the topic. The Solar Schools program recognizes this issue, hence why it provides a comprehensive toolkit.

San Francisco, CA, U.S.A.¹¹

Composting is one of San Francisco's youth sustainability practices. Through the "Food to Flowers: Lunchroom Composting" program, organic waste from lunchrooms is diverted away from landfills and transported to an off-site facility, where it is then turned into compost. The compost is used as fertilizer by farmers, landscape companies, and school garden programs. Students are responsible for sorting the lunchroom waste and placing organic material into designated composting bins. 30-minute compost training is provided to the students by San Francisco Environment. San Francisco Environment further offers assemblies and materials to teach students about issues revolving around waste and the benefits of composting. Since its introduction, the program has done well in diverting organic waste from landfills, promoting environmental awareness, and providing students with educational opportunities.

¹⁰ Solar Schools. 2023. Inspired Energy Education with Impact. Retrieved from: <https://www.solarschools.net/>

¹¹ SF Environment Department. 2020. Food to flowers! Lunchroom Composting. Retrieved from: <https://sfenvironment.org/food-to-flowers-lunchroom-composting>

This program helps instill sustainable mindsets in youth by actively involving them in composting practices. By providing education and training on proper waste disposal at an early age, children are more likely to develop a habit of eco-friendly practices. The program further helps San Francisco divert a significant amount of organic waste from landfills, benefiting both the city and environment.

CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS

Based on our objectives for this paper and the analysis of existing programming above, we have created a criteria of success to help guide our proposed solutions. Regardless of which proposed solution is selected to execute, it should be subject to yearly audits based on the following criteria to understand what benefits the participants derive from it and whether it is achieving its goals.

1. *Affordability & Accessibility:* *Is the chosen strategy accessible to all groups (urban and rural communities, minority groups etc)?* The youth engagement strategy should take youth's potential physical, emotional, financial, and geographical barriers to learning into consideration. This could include offering free or low-cost educational materials and events, as well as providing language translations and accommodations for people with disabilities.

- The youth engagement strategy should also provide a safe environment that allows youth to be themselves and develop supportive relationships with adults. Relationships with adults are valuable for building a sense of personal competence and a sense of collective competence, which are critical for empowering youth to engage with an environmental mindset.

2. *Financial feasibility:* *Is the chosen strategy able to continue consistently throughout the years?* It will be important to establish a long-term plan that outlines the necessary resources and funding to sustain the program over time. This could involve developing partnerships with local schools, organizations, and government agencies that share a commitment to sustainability and can provide ongoing support.

- Consistent government financing can also play a crucial role in ensuring the feasibility of the program. By securing stable funding from government sources, the program can continue to offer affordable educational materials and events, hire qualified staff, and expand its reach to more members of the community. To achieve consistent government financing, the program could advocate for its mission and demonstrate its impact to policymakers and other stakeholders. This could involve presenting data and case studies that highlight the program's success in promoting sustainable practices and engaging youth in community initiatives.

3. *Program efficacy:* *Does the chosen strategy effectively ingrain sustainability into the mindset of youth?* The youth engagement strategy should emphasize the benefits of sustainable living for young people and the community as a whole. This could include highlighting the positive impact of sustainable practices on health, social equity, and economic resilience. Additionally, the strategy should incorporate activities that encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as promoting the importance of lifelong learning.

- Reputable leaders with vast knowledge of topics such as environmental education, governance, and systems thinking will be critical in assisting youth throughout the strategy. Knowing that

there is reliable and credible support available gives young people the confidence to explore and build skills confidently¹².

4. *Applicability:* *Do the deliverables of the chosen strategy cater to different age groups and ethnic backgrounds?* The youth engagement strategy should provide hands-on learning opportunities that are tailored to various age groups within the vast category of “youth”. This will allow participants to effectively understand and apply their newfound knowledge and skills in real-world situations regardless of their age. Further, as youth have various levels of experience and exposure to environmental education, they could perceive the relevance of the program differently. Therefore, the strategy should vary in its difficulty to account for beginner and advanced levels of participants.

- It is also important that the youth engagement strategy reflects and respects participants’ diverse backgrounds and integrates their differences to better engage youth. The strategy should incentivize youth to take initiative to participate in the program for educational reasons and also personal benefits such as skill and career development and networking opportunities.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Collaborations with educational institutions

Toronto should provide institutions of higher education with the opportunity to lead the way in promoting sustainability by offering a cutting-edge course in environmental programs. This course, offered in universities and colleges, will equip students with valuable knowledge in sustainability and innovative techniques to cultivate a sustainable mindset. Using the knowledge gained, students will be required to participate in a project where they design and execute educational and interactive sustainability activities for youth. These activities will be implemented in public schools ranging from middle school to secondary schools, with universities and colleges assigned to specific schools by the city. The students will be required to present an activity to their designated school once a week for one month. To ensure the success of this project, the city will provide universities with the necessary tools and resources to execute the activities developed by the students or implement the course.

Criteria for success

- **Affordability & Accessibility:** The program will be free for students. It also ensures that environmental education is targeted to the needs of specific schools and reaches a wide range of youth across the city. Lastly, with young adults as the leaders of the program, it will be easier for children to build relationships, ask questions, engage in discussions with their educators and openly be themselves in the program.
- **Financial Feasibility:** The cost burden of the program will be on universities and colleges. Costs can include the operation of the course and resources required by students to execute the activities they design. Schools and universities can seek funding from the City of Toronto.

¹² Chawla, L., & Cushing, D. F. (2007). Education for strategic environmental behavior. *Environmental education research*, 13(4), 437-452.

- **Program Efficacy:** University students are equipped with knowledge of sustainability before joining the project, making them a reliable source of sustainability knowledge for youth. They will also be equipped with techniques that are helpful in cultivating sustainable mindsets which can be used in the design of their activities.
- **Applicability:** It is vital for school leaders to recognize that youth have various levels of experience and exposure to environmental education such that they could perceive the relevance of the program differently. This recognition must translate directly into the activities they design. Consequently, the student leaders will be advised to create programming that aligns with the needs of the age group to which they are assigned. Likewise, the deliverables cater to different age groups ranging from middle schools to secondary schools.

Recommendation 2: City of Toronto Youth Sustainability Council

The youth demographic is currently a missing voice in the limited City of Toronto sustainability programs. As a city that houses some of the most prominent educational institutions in the country, it is important that the local government engages students and young people from these institutions in decision-making processes that shape sustainability strategy. Our proposal is that this engagement take the form of a youth council that is specifically dedicated to sustainability strategy, events, and initiatives, working in tandem with the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy team.

The council will comprise a team of 10 young people between the ages of 15-30 who will provide their opinions on and help guide the ideation of sustainability strategies, events, and initiatives. Additionally, the council will be responsible for leading one event or initiative per quarter. This will allow young people to not only learn how events and initiatives are run through helping the Net Zero team, but it will also empower them to run events and initiatives that are especially important to their age group. The youth council should be able to rely on assistance from employees at TransformTO and use the City of Toronto's connections to help their events and initiatives run smoothly. It is also important that monthly meetings are held with the Net Zero team and youth council to ensure that there are feelings of psychological safety within the team, allowing the partnership to flourish.

Criteria for success

- **Affordability & Accessibility:** The youth council will be free for youth to join, but it will be based on an application process. The application will be assessed based on criteria such as the applicant's interest in sustainability or experience in the community. The council will also need to be diverse and representative of the community. Overall, the selection criteria will be vital in ensuring that the selection of participants is transparent and free from bias.
- **Financial Feasibility:** The TransformTO Net Zero team will be responsible for allocating a budget to the youth council. Aside from the costs of running four events or initiatives each year, the costs will not be strenuous. If necessary, the council could apply for grants directly provided for sustainability efforts.
- **Program Efficacy:** While the youth council will be expected to have some knowledge or experience, they will be mentored by advisors in the City of Toronto who have years of experience in governance and managing sustainability related issues. Assistance from employees

at TransformTO such as those part of the Environment and Energy Division will further be available as an alternate resource.

- **Applicability:** This youth council will only be applicable to young people aged 15-30 who have a decent amount of knowledge of the environment and sustainability. This means that the strategy may not vary much in its difficulty to account for beginner and advanced levels of participants. Nevertheless, having council members with at least intermediate knowledge or experience is necessary to ensure that the quarterly activities are effective. Likewise, the strategy will directly incentivize youth to take initiative to participate in the program for educational reasons and also personal benefits such as skill and career development and networking opportunities.

Recommendation 3: Sustainability Education and Activity Manual¹³

Sustainability education in Ontario's curriculum is lacking due to insufficient classroom resources, professional knowledge, and engagement techniques. To address this issue, TransformTO's Environment and Energy Division (EED) should collaborate with the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) to develop an informative manual for Torontonians teachers. This comprehensive guide will cover essential sustainability topics and offer a variety of engaging activities that teachers can incorporate into their classroom instruction.

The EED will lead the design of the sustainability topics and propose activities for students to execute. The CPDD will work with the EED to refine these activities to better ingrain a sustainable mindset in youth. Once completed, the manual will be provided to teachers free of charge, enabling them to expand their professional knowledge and inspire students to participate in sustainability practices through engaging activities. The city will further provide schools with the necessary resources and tools needed to successfully execute the activities outlined in the manual. Overall, the manual will empower teachers to provide effective sustainability education while encouraging the pursuit of sustainability practices amongst the Torontonian youth community.

Criteria for success

- **Affordability & Accessibility:** The manuals will be freely available to all public school educators. Any tools or resources required to execute the activities outlined in the manual will further be provided to each school. Educational institutions can choose to print the manuals if their educators require that format for accessibility purposes.
- **Financial Feasibility:** The main costs pertaining to this initiative will revolve around paying the EED and CPDD workers involved in the creation of the manuals and the initial distribution of activity resources provided to the public schools. The manuals will be published online, such that no additional printing or distribution costs will be necessary for the process.
- **Program Efficacy:** The information in the manuals will be guided by experts in the environment and education space, allowing educators to trust the information within them. Likewise, equipping educators with accurate information will ensure that students too are provided with

¹³ EdCan Network. 2020. Climate Change Education in the Canadian Classroom. Retrieved from: <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/climate-change-education-canada/>

knowledge that is unbiased, consistent, and free of misconceptions relating to topics such as climate change

- **Applicability:** The information in the manual will be tailored to youth from all ages, cultures, and social backgrounds. The information and activities will be separated based on different grade levels. By varying in its difficulty, the manual will be able to account for beginner and advanced levels of participants. The manuals will be long, but will take the diversity of youth into consideration.

Recommendation 4: Solar Schools Initiative

The Toronto District School Board's Solar School initiative, which involves installing solar panels on rooftops, is a commendable effort to promote sustainability through renewable energy sources. However, it misses out on an essential component of engaging youth and fostering sustainable mindsets. To make a more significant impact, the city should expand on this initiative by incorporating the successful Solar Schools Program of New Zealand and Australia.

Under this strategy, the city will equip all 600 TDSB schools with an energy meter that records live consumption and energy generation data. Furthermore, students will be granted access to an interactive online platform that tracks, visualizes, and analyzes their school's energy efficiency. By implementing energy-saving strategies and monitoring their progress through this portal, students will see tangible results and be inspired to pursue sustainable actions. This approach is more effective than simply providing sustainability lectures or telling students to be environmentally conscious, as it will allow them to witness firsthand the impact of their efforts.

Criteria for Success:

- **Affordability & Accessibility:** This program will have no cost to children. Further, all students attending schools with this initiative will have access to the program, making it a natural part of the school experience. Since schools can leverage the equipment and facilities in different ways, they can look into methods of catering for those with learning disabilities or additional support.
- **Financial Feasibility:** The Toronto District School Board can subsidize most of the costs through city funding. Consequently, the city will burden the costs of equipment and facilities. These costs will primarily be incurred in the initial application of this strategy and will see minimal to no additional cost in the long-term.
- **Program Efficacy:** While there is a risk of not having a professional with the expertise and skills to explain the functionality of the equipment and guide students on skills development, it will be important to engage interested educators in training regarding solar panels. Likewise, the strategy may ingrain sustainability into the mindset of youth by enabling students to see the direct impact of their initiatives.
- **Applicability:** Once schools have the equipment and facilities in place, they can leverage them in different ways. It allows schools to adjust the design and delivery of the program based on the different interests and competence of the age groups.

RISKS & MITIGATION STRATEGY

1. Barriers to Youth Engagement

Youth often choose not to engage in initiatives due to several reasons. These reasons include¹⁴:

- Feeling disconnected from and overwhelmed by their living conditions;
- Feeling that they have no voice and/or their opinions do not matter;
- Feeling intimidated that adults will judge them for their lack of experience or knowledge; and
- Feeling undervalued by adults who task them with unimportant tasks that they do not believe will bring about change.

As a consequence, many youths are dubious about methods of engagement.

In addition to environmental issues, youth face personal and more immediate challenges such as obtaining affordable housing, the COVID-19 pandemic, access to healthcare, and unemployment. All of these issues may have an influence on their decisions and behaviors, including their volunteer and engagement habits.

Youth also encounter logistical challenges, such as inadequate reimbursement and scheduling and timing conflicts. Examples include events that take place when youths are unable to attend due to schooling, volunteer work, or paid employment – with no compensation for labor or expenses incurred while volunteering¹⁵. Organizations also encounter challenges when attempting to involve youths, especially finding ways to engage youths meaningfully. It can be difficult to create opportunities, locate resources, and provide appropriate incentives. Additionally, many organizations may encounter resistance from staff and leadership simply because they do not prioritize youth engagement. Some might not even know where to look for young people, let alone how to reach out and engage them. Their greatest misunderstanding is that youths do not want to engage.

Mitigation Strategy:

- Improve involvement and consultation methods to ensure that the voices and viewpoints of youths from diverse backgrounds are heard and valued.
- Create accessible and inclusive options for youths to participate, such as through online platforms, virtual meetings, and activities that do not require an abundance of time or money.
- Conduct yearly audits based on the proposed criteria for success (as mentioned above) and make necessary improvements as initiatives progress.

¹⁴ Clean Air Partnership. 2022. Youth Engagement Report: Collaborating for a Better Future, Engaging Youth in Municipal Climate Action. Retrieved from <https://www.cleanairpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Youth-Engagement-Report-Final.pdf>.

¹⁵ Clean Air Partnership. 2022. Youth Engagement Report: Collaborating for a Better Future, Engaging Youth in Municipal Climate Action. Retrieved from <https://www.cleanairpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Youth-Engagement-Report-Final.pdf>.

2. Lack of Financial and Institutional Support

Resources are necessary to sustain environmental activities. Permit fees, facility leasing, equipment and supplies, training and workshops, communications, and transportation fees are all constituted as expenses. While some funding sources exist; for example, the Youth Climate Action Grants¹⁶ and the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation Grant¹⁷, they are limited and not sustainable for the long term development of youth-led initiatives. This poses a high risk against youth engagement and climate action. It might be challenging for organizations/programs to maintain their operations, produce effective initiatives, and reach a larger audience of youths when financing is inadequate.

Furthermore, the absence of government assistance may limit the influence and scope of youth-led environmental initiatives since these groups will likely encounter institutional impediments to participation in political and decision-making processes. The ability to participate and invoke political change is crucial for youths to continue leading environmental initiatives.

Mitigation Strategy:

- The City should allocate a financial budget to procure the materials required for the full implementation of the initiatives suggested in this study.
- The City should simplify bureaucratic procedures that may restrict access to financial independence of youth-led initiatives. This involves streamlining the administrative procedures for grant applications.
- The City may assist youth-led advocacy activities by simplifying access to decision-makers and stakeholders and organizing opportunities for youths to partake in public hearings and consultations.

CONCLUSION

Toronto's current Net Zero Strategy is ambitious and comprehensive, but it is lacking in youth and community engagement initiatives. This report has emphasized the importance of such engagement in addition to providing recommendations for how to cultivate greater youth engagement in sustainability initiatives in Toronto. These recommendations aim to help the City of Toronto achieve its Net Zero Strategy and educate the leaders of tomorrow on how to manage challenges such as the climate crisis. In addition, this report identified potential risks and ways to address them. By implementing these mitigation strategies, the City of Toronto can help achieve youth engagement in environmental initiatives and create a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient future for youths in our city.

¹⁶ City of Toronto. 2022. Youth Climate Action Grants. Retrieved from: <https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/water-environment/environmental-grants-incentives/youth-climate-action-grants/>.

¹⁷ TD Bank. 2022. TD Friends of the Environment Foundation Grant. Retrieved from: <https://www.td.com/ca/en/about-td/ready-commitment/funding/fe-f-grant>.

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