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Albertans want government to increase environmental education in schools

Environmental educators believe improving elementary science curriculum is critical to long-term sustainability

Albertans are becoming more aware of the serious consequences of environmental issues like climate change, and they want the government to do something about it, starting in our elementary schools.

A new Ipsos Reid poll released today by the Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE) indicates that an overwhelming percentage of Albertans want environmental education and citizenship skills taught in Alberta's schools. The poll findings were reported at the "Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries" International Eco-Conference, presented by the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary, May 7 through 9.

"Our research clearly shows that Albertans want the government to make environmental education a bigger priority in our school systems," says ACEE executive director Gareth Thomson. "Fortunately, the elementary science curriculum is currently under review. It's imperative that revisions to the curriculum include more environmental education and opportunities for student action projects, so we can build the sustainable society that we Albertans say we want."

Mishka Lysack, Eco-Conference co-chair and assistant professor at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work, emphasizes that it is imperative to move from mere understanding of environmental issues to behaviour change. "Starting from an early age, people need to learn how to encourage government to 'do the right thing' to protect the environment," he says.

Poll findings include:

- Two-thirds of Albertans believe that more government action is needed to solve the environmental problems facing Alberta, and 75 percent believe that "schools in Alberta should give top priority to providing students with opportunities to do environmental action projects."
- Support was high for projects such as neighbourhood clean-ups (90 percent), educating others about local environmental issues (78 percent), and presenting to politicians on environmental issues (67 percent—over two-thirds of Albertans).
- Most Albertans also believe that environmental education should help students increase their environmental knowledge and understanding of environmental issues (88 percent), and build citizenship skills that can help develop solutions to our most pressing environmental issues (81 percent).
- Unfortunately, polling indicates that Albertans are generally uninformed about important environmental issues. Less than half of Albertans claimed to know a great deal about any of the issues they were

asked about, including global climate change (45 percent), urban sprawl around Alberta towns and cities (42 percent), pollution of water in Alberta (33 percent), and endangered species in Alberta (29 percent). The majority of Albertans (53 percent) incorrectly believe that “recycling all your paper and tins helps the environment more than moving to a smaller, more fuel-efficient home.”

- The polling also shows a deficit in Albertans’ skills and participation in public action to protect the environment. Only eight percent of Albertans say they organize community action to protect the environment as much as they can; just nine percent write letters to the editor about environmental issues to this degree; and only 14 percent of Albertans say they communicate their concerns about the environment to their elected officials as much as they can.

“To solve environmental issues like climate change, it is not enough to just change light bulbs, we need to change laws,” says Eco-Conference keynote speaker Karsten Heuer, an award-winning author, biologist and conservationist. “We must educate tomorrow’s citizens if Alberta is to become a world leader in environmental sustainability.”

“Kids who get to roll up their sleeves and actually do something to help the environment walk away feeling hopeful about the future,” adds ACEE’s Gareth Thomson. “Positive environmental action needs to be woven into all of our policies, including our new Kindergarten to Grade 6 curriculum.”

Students from University Elementary School will be available to describe the positive outcomes experienced through their recent environmental action project.

Interviews with all presenters will be available after the media conference. Backgrounder and full media package are available at abcee.org/about-us/polling, or at the media conference.

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