

Eco School inspires kids in South Algonquin

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The Eco Schools program is a great worldwide initiative that teaches kids more about nature and the environment but also puts the onus into the hands of the students to be better environmental stewards, and with teacher support, can demonstrate environmental learning and climate action within their community. While taking on initiatives like promoting water conservation, walking to school or bringing in a waste-free lunch, schools earn points toward certification levels that range from bronze to platinum, and are assessed under guidelines administered by Eco Schools International and Eco Schools Canada. Some of the activities also get the kids outside of the school into the great outdoors more, which is a plus during COVID-19. One such Eco School is St. Martin of Tours Catholic School, located in South Algonquin Township, in Whitney, Ontario.

Eco Schools is one of six initiatives founded by the Foundation for Environmental Education based in Denmark, which has been in operation since 1981. The Eco Schools program was launched in 1994 in Denmark, Germany, Greece and the United Kingdom. It has now spread to 59,000 schools in 68 countries across the globe. Eco Schools has been recognized by UNESCO and the UN Environment as a leader in the fields of environmental education and education for sustainable development.

Galen Drinnan is the communications manager with EcoSchools Canada. He says that in the 15 years that the program has been around in Canada, the program has grown to nearly 2,000 schools and reaches almost one million students a year. "At present, we work with 83 per cent of school boards and 40 per cent of schools in Ontario. We're also pleased to say that after only a week of opening registration to all schools in Canada for this year's program, we've already received registrations from five provinces and territories," he says.

Drinnan says that overall, the response to the program has been very positive, with 89 per cent of school boards indicating that the program has helped shaped board policies and 84 per cent of teachers saying they would recommend the program to their colleagues.

One of these educators is Tara McEnergy, who is the vice principal at both St Martin of Tours Catholic School in Whitney and at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic School in Bancroft. She says that St. Martin of Tours has been an Eco School for the past three years, and that the students in that school, all 14 of them, mostly participate in the program.

"Some kids love it, but it is work. The idea is that it is supposed to be student led with a staff advisor, but sometimes it ends up being staff led. A lot of times you'll get the younger kids who are really keen to help out but they need more supervision. Once the kids get older, there is so much more that they are involved in and they find it hard to manage their time to fit it in.

Usually there's a group of kids in Grade 3 or 4 who are super keen, but by the time they get to Grade 8 they're preoccupied with a test or a sporting event. But it is supposed to be multi-grade participation," she says.

McEnergy says that is one of the things you can get points for, how many grades and teachers that participate in the program.

"Of course, it's better to have all grades in on it so that the younger kids can progress from helping out with it to leading it as they get older," she says.

Schools can accumulate points for Eco School certification by doing a list of preassigned tasks like; recycling, composting, making sure the lights are off at recess, turning off the computers at recess, having printers and photocopiers print on both sides of the page,

programming thermostats to cool down on evenings and weekends, and other things in the same vein. These points, depending on how many a school can get, will give them a bronze, silver, gold or platinum certification by the end of the school year.

McEnergy says they just started to count points about a week ago, and that schools have until Jan. 31 to register. They have until April 30 to submit all their information for points to obtain their certifications for the 2020/2021 school year.

McEnergy says they recently had a visit from their outdoor and environmental education special assignment teacher, Mike Bibby, who also coordinates programs at the H.R. Frink Outdoor Education Centre near Plainfield and the Msgr. J.S. Ryan Centre on Wolfe Island. He led the students in a game of Trappers and Traders in the schoolyard.

McEnergy says that the kids were assigned clipboards and sought out information around the schoolyard. Then when they got back, they answered questions about the relationship between European traders and Indigenous peoples. When they got the questions right, they got tokens which they could save up to buy supplies from the trading centre. At the end, they could see if they had appropriate materials to get them through the winter. So, we played the game and then we went and collected some wood and built a fire, so things like that, she says, Usually, [Bibby] takes them into Algonquin Park for a day of environmental learning but with COVID-19 restrictions and not being able to bus the kids there, that's not possible.

While the outdoor education is not technically part of the Eco Schools program, according to McEnergy, it can be counted towards getting points for it. However, Bibby oversees Eco School support.

He kind of acts as the overseer of the program. He'll send out reminder emails to the staff or the board to remind them of dates, or a suggestion or he'll help to organize workshops and training, so if staff participate in professional development related to Eco Schools, then they can get extra points toward the certification too, she says.

McEnergy says like many things, the Eco Schools program has been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. For instance, she's pretty sure that like St. Martin of Tours and Our Lady of Mercy, most Eco Schools wouldn't be composting, as that would require one student to go around to different classrooms every week to collect the compost for disposal, presenting an unacceptable virus exposure risk.

A lot of the activity of the Eco Schools has been impacted and it has to be rethought about how it will get done, she says. People still want to do it, it's just a matter of how.

Drinnan pointed out that a list of suggested adaptations has been created for all actions within the Eco Schools program due to COVID-19. Things like bringing learning outside whenever possible, bringing Eco Schools concepts into the classroom, have the whole school participate (while adhering to health and safety restrictions, don't focus on getting points but focus on learning and having fun and share and learn from other schools about their strategies for making Eco Schools work during COVID-19.

So, this means that whether schools are participating in-class, remotely or in a hybrid situation, he says, the program and certification are still accessible to everyone.