

Highlights of Youth Engagement Toward a National Framework for Environmental Learning



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Youth Engagement at a Glance

Between May and July 2024, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) invited youth across Canada to have their say on what a National Framework for Environmental Learning (NFEL) should look like and what its impact should be. In response, over 300 passionate youth voiced their thoughts and feelings on the landscape of environmental learning.

Some youth under 18 years old:

- participated in a classroom conversation and youth survey facilitated by their teacher through a partnership with EcoSchools Canada;
- shared their ideas on sticky notes at youth events (Métis National Council Youth Summit on Climate Change, Model UN, Children First Canada and Vote 16).

Some youth aged 18–30:

- responded to an online survey open to all Canadians;
- participated in focus groups led by youth policy advisors.

Highlights show a snapshot of the candid opinions, creative ideas and critical support youth participants shared for an inclusive and impactful NFEL.

What Youth Respondents Want to See in a NFEL

Urgency

Youth respondents stressed that a sense of urgency is essential for a NFEL. They want a NFEL to be implemented as soon as possible, and for it to convey the urgency of the climate crisis that is required to cause timely and meaningful climate action.

One focus group participant said: It's important that we hurry up and teach more about environmental learning so future generations can live on a more sustainable planet.



Key Guiding Principles

Ninety-one percent of youth aged 18–30 felt having guiding principles was important. The top-rated guiding principles were that a NFEL be:

- responsive to emerging challenges (95%)
- interdisciplinary (94%)
- adaptive to local needs (95%)
- justice-focused (91%)
- collaborative (94%)

Focus group participants spoke passionately about each of these: I really hope that [NFEL] can express climate justice. ... environmental justice principles have to be completely part of this... I hope it moves towards that interdisciplinary, interconnected, socio-ecological justice approach.

Addressing Gaps in Environmental Learning

Seventy-eight percent of youth respondents under 18 said they get their information about the environment and climate change from school. Additionally, youth like learning about the environment through:

- field trips (73%)
- learning outdoors in general (69%)
- project-based learning (48%)

Land-based learning led by Indigenous people as well as place-based education more generally were the most popular forms of environmental learning shared by youth 18–30 in focus groups and on sticky notes.

One note read: I wish I learnt on the land and from Indigenous people who hold knowledge and fostering a respectful relationship with the land and waters.



The consensus from youth respondents of all ages was that high-quality environmental learning experiences were not happening enough in schools. One focus group participant speculated that this was “because the curriculums are so janky” (which Merriam-Webster defines as “of very poor quality”). Many others felt similarly and cited “limited collaboration between federal and provincial/territorial governments” and “limited teacher supports” as extremely big problems.

One youth said: The fact that you’re a federated system [means] there’s lots of really great work happening around the country [but] there’s just a lack of cohesion.

While another said: Teachers are super overworked and they’re not paid enough... a lot of the time they’re just trying to get through the day... and if it’s not mandated, it’s just not going to get taught... [We need to] make sure that they’re not burning out and they’re equipped to do this work because they might not have the capacity to do it in the structure we’re in.



Success Criteria for Measuring Progress on Environmental Learning

Youth respondents aged 18–30 rated the following as either “Somewhat” or “Very Important” elements to include in a NFEL:

- tools and mechanisms for collaboration and implementation (95%)
- identifying barriers and how to address them (94%)
- ways to measure progress (92%)

Focus group respondents felt likewise and noted that a success criterion for measuring progress could remove barriers and support collaboration.

One respondent suggested that a success criterion should: ...include some clear, concise learning outcomes to help teachers, while another wanted specific goals, timelines or metrics within [NFEL], even just a couple goals like “we want to increase learning about biodiversity by x amount by x year,” as these help organizations in their funding efforts because they don’t have to guess what the governments are going to fund.

What Youth Respondents Want to See as the Main Impacts From a NFEL

Indigenous Leadership

Respondents aged 18–30 identified the following groups as those who should be leading the development of a NFEL:

- First Nation, Métis and Inuit governments (76%)
- federal government (56%)
- scientists (56%)

This finding is brought sharply into focus when we consider that there were only three youth survey respondents and only 15 survey respondents overall who identified as Indigenous. This means there is currently a significant gap of Indigenous voices consulting on a NFEL, let alone leading it. More outreach with Indigenous youth and members of the public is essential.

Role of the Government of Canada

Many youth respondents feel a NFEL could help the federal government reconsider its role in environmental learning to deliver the most impact. Youth respondents aged 18–30 feel the Government of Canada’s role is to:

- fund environmental education projects and initiatives (89%);
- ensure compliance with international commitments on environmental education (77%);
- bring together various groups to discuss opportunities for collaboration and best practices (72%).

Focus group participants were especially adamant about “more accessible funding” for environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) and non-profit organizations (NPOs) and “opportunities to share and connect”.

As another participant explained: ...there’s such a scarcity mindset [amongst ENGOS and NPOs] and it’s hard to move away from that when there is such a lack of funding. [A network] could really help with that.



Attention on Topics of Most Interest

Youth respondents under 18 said the environment-related topics they care most about are:

- climate change (68%)
- health and wellbeing (63%)
- water (59%)
- equity and reconciliation (57%)

As one focus group participant said: The framework should support mental health initiatives and emotional support resources to promote a positive outlook toward environmentalism.

Strengthening Connection to and Understanding of Nature and Better Integration of Indigenous Knowledge

According to youth respondents aged 18–30, mainstreaming environmental learning through a NFEL should have high impact on:

- strengthening people’s connection to and understanding of nature to develop more sustainable habits (93%);
- better integration of Indigenous knowledge into environmental learning (93%).

Focus groups spoke about these in connection with place-based intersectional environmental learning.

As one participant said: I’m curious to see what kind of curriculum will come out of this [NFEL] in terms of how environment is discussed — there’s a real concern that it may be too detached from underlying systemic processes.



Helping Canadians sort through information and misinformation

“Helping Canadians navigate information and misinformation” was identified as another high impact outcome by 90% of respondents aged 18–30. Misinformation is a considerable factor. Respondents under 18 get environmental information from:

- social media, such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram (61%), where misinformation can be rampant;
- family (40%), where discussions on how “misinformation about climate change, especially when espoused by students’ parents, presents a barrier to students’ learning about climate change and environmental issues”.

Accountability

The focus group conversations featured some skepticism on how a NFEL would actually be implemented given the nuance of this complex issue. Youth pointed out their perception of inconsistent or contradictory approaches to implementation.

The importance of accountability was flagged as crucial for implementation, as one participant thoughtfully articulated: Just to speak a bit about skepticism, I think we’ve named already that environmental education needs to be intersectional, multidisciplinary and centre climate change not as an isolated situation but as a symptom of systems of oppression, of colonial capitalism. In my experience, youth already understand these connections and youth movements are recognizing that we can’t have climate justice without decolonization, without class solidarity, without racial justice, without language revitalization and without land back. I think what turns a lot of people off or makes them skeptical about the prospect of a program being implemented is when the education or the policy involved refuses to centre or acknowledge those realities...there is so much hypocrisy in government spaces when, on the one hand, climate change is called a priority, but then oil and gas is subsidized, pipelines are illegally pushed through Indigenous lands and our foreign policy involves human rights violations for extractive industries... So, when an education strategy is coming from this context, I think that naming this hypocrisy and being real about these tensions is so important to ensuring buy-in, particularly from youth but at all levels - there just needs to be some accountability.



Green Jobs

Fifty-eight percent of youth respondents under 18 said they are interested in a green career (i.e., in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture or environmental conservation). Focus group participants echoed this need for support for green jobs and the connection to empowerment through action.

One participant said that: ...as an oil and gas community, the community recognizes that we need to move forward in sustainable renewable energy and finding [green] jobs.

One respondent wrote on a sticky note that something that is needed is: ...better guidance on career opportunities in fields related to climate change — there are so many pathways to be part of the solution.



Emerging Vision

Taken together, youth respondents shared that they would value a NFEL that is:

- inclusive
- locally relevant
- supportive of high-quality environmental learning across Canada

As one focus group participant said: I'll be really frank... if we are not supporting intersectional approaches — then we're totally screwed.



Another commented that: It can't be too prescriptive — it needs to provide tools to empower communities to improve environmental education in a locally relevant way.

While another youth wondered: How can we facilitate the support communities need without imposing top-down hierarchical dynamics?

There were also many lively conversations and survey responses about integrating environmental learning more formally in schools: I'd like to know how well can the national framework inform policy change... devoting a specific course to environmental learning in elementary schools would be one major way the government can inform environmental learning.



Overall, youth engagement related to developing a NFEL reveals an urgent call for a comprehensive, inclusive, and actionable strategy. The strong message from over 300 young Canadians is that a NFEL must be implemented immediately and rooted in guiding principles that are:

- responsive to emerging challenges
- adaptive to local needs
- collaborative
- interdisciplinary
- justice focused

The youth highlighted significant gaps in current environmental education, calling for:

- better integration of Indigenous knowledge;
- improved learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom;
- effective strategies for combating misinformation about the environment.

They also stressed the need for robust collaboration and accountability mechanisms, alongside support for green career pathways. Ultimately, the insights provided point to a framework that must be both locally relevant and capable of driving meaningful, long-term change nationally in environmental education.