

NEWS RELEASE

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New poll indicates Alberta failing to prepare youth to solve environmental challenges in the 21st century

The Alberta Government must put more emphasis on environmental education if Albertans are to build a sustainable society

A new Ipsos Reid report on an April 2010 poll indicating that the education system must do more to prepare students to address the growing environmental and sustainability challenges of the 21st century will be released by the Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE) and the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) on Saturday, May 8, at the Radisson Hotel in Canmore at 12:15 PM.

The poll of 459 Alberta high school students and older youth (ages 18 to 24), indicates that youths' knowledge of environmental action—and their reported level of participation in public action—is markedly low. Further, the majority of youth are not interested in traditional approaches, such as presenting to politicians, participating in public meetings or debates, or participating in petitions.

In addition, youth engagement in most of the eight environmental behaviours assessed is moderate to low, and youth do not seem to have a strong drive or desire to take personal responsibility to protect the environment. Alberta youth rank themselves least responsible out of six groups for looking after the environment in Alberta, and believe that government, industry and environmental groups are the most responsible.

“Teachers strive to help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to be active citizens,” says ATA President Carol Henderson. “However, just as important is developing a personal commitment to act, both in one’s personal life as well as in the public sphere. This is especially true for environmental issues and it is not something schools can or should do alone. We owe it to our young people to create more opportunities for hands-on learning that actually means something to them and to society.”

“These polling results have one simple message for Albertans: We need to do better,” says ACEE Chair Jeff Reading. “This is a wakeup call for politicians, educators and parents who want to help the next generation create a sustainable future in the face of growing environmental problems.”

Erin Couillard, president of the ATA’s Global Environmental and Outdoor Education Council shares this concern. “Our teachers really want to help students become environmentally literate—but an overloaded curriculum and workload is eroding their ability to do this.”

Kyla Schenk, a Grade 10 student at Canmore Collegiate High School who is knowledgeable and concerned about the environment, credits the key adults in her life. “When it comes to the environment, my teacher, Mr. Bittner, doesn’t just talk the talk, he walks the walk,” says Schenk.

“Climate change is just one of the many environmental issues affecting us today, and although we didn’t cause these problems, it’s going to be up to us to solve them,” adds Schenk. “In order to do that, we need to spend more time on environmental studies and politics.”

Sabrina Niesman, a student in the social justice club at George McDougall High School, in Airdrie, agrees. “Mr Hughes’s humanitarianism is contagious! He gives us opportunities and never lets us forget that they’re there.”

Chelsey Dawes, a former student of Glyn Hughes, has gone on to study nonprofit management and is now doing her master’s degree in social justice. “Mr Hughes said to me one day, ‘Chelsey, there are problems in this world—what are you going to do about it?’ To this day, I don’t think he realizes the impact that question had on me.”

Sophie Barry is a Grade 6 student in Calgary who recently founded the Elboya School Green Team to reduce her school’s environmental footprint. “When I read about the results of this poll, I became very concerned about our future. I hope that when I reach high school there will still be lots of opportunities for kids like me to get involved in making the world a better place.”

The poll results will be announced at the Creating a Legacy Together—a Conference for Global Citizenship, on Saturday, May 8, at the Radisson Hotel in Canmore. More than 250 concerned educators are gathering to develop a framework for environmental and global education in Alberta that will shape policy and ensure that hands-on learning and environmental citizenship will be an increasingly important part of what goes on in Alberta’s classrooms.

A press conference will be held at Radisson Hotel and Conference Centre, 511 Bow Valley Trail, Canmore, at 12:15 P.M. in the Grizzly/Cougar Room. The students and adults quoted above will be available for interviews after the presentation.

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Please see the accompanying backgrounder for more information about the polling results. This backgrounder and the full report will be available at the news conference.

For additional information, please contact

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Environmental Citizenship and Alberta Youth: A Backgrounder on the April 2010 Poll

Synopsis of results from the Ipsos Reid report on this polling (April 2010)

- Among Alberta's youth, knowledge of public action skills and reported participation in these public action skills are markedly low. Further, the majority of youth are not interested in presenting to politicians, participating in public meetings or debates, or participating in petitions.
- Youth engagement in most of the eight environmental behaviours assessed is moderate to low.
- Youth in Alberta lack knowledge about environmental protection. For example, less than one-quarter (23 per cent) of youth know that moving to a smaller, more energy-efficient home helps the environment more than recycling all their paper and tins.
- Given a list of six groups to be held responsible for looking after the environment, Alberta youth consider themselves to be the least responsible. Government, industry and environmental groups are the stakeholders they consider most responsible.
- Alberta youth do not seem to have a strong drive or desire to take personal responsibility to protect the environment. For example, less than 40 per cent of youth in Alberta indicate that they are willing to live with fewer material goods or in a smaller home to help the environment.
- Alberta youth do not feel that they know a great deal about the five environmental issues evaluated.
- Alberta youth believe that the communication channels that motivate them to take action to protect the environment (in descending order) are family members, friends, television, teachers and classroom learning. Blogs and podcasts ranked the lowest of the 17 communication channels assessed.
- Of the 12 motivators assessed for environmental action, youth consider protecting people's health to be the most important. Other important motivators include a desire to protect the environment, knowledge of change or progress, and personal values and beliefs.
- Participating in hands-on projects, such as recycling and neighbourhood cleanups, garners the most interest from youth.

What does this mean for Albertans?

Given the results of this poll, the Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE), Alberta's teachers, and other environmental and education stakeholders see a need to

- work with Alberta Education to create new curricula that help students develop the necessary values, knowledge, skills and behaviours that will lead to environmental sustainability;
- recognize that teachers strive to give students the citizenship skills they need—but an overloaded curriculum and a heavy workload erode teachers’ ability to do this;
- encourage hands-on, real learning in schools, and assessment that includes the various attributes of environmental citizenship—we owe it to youth to offer hands-on learning, as they learn best this way;
- understand that Albertans support this (for example, a 2009 poll of 801 Albertan adults by the ACEE tells us that 75 per cent of Albertans agree that “schools in Alberta should give TOP priority to providing students with opportunities to do environmental action projects”);
- ensure that teachers have the training and planning time needed to incorporate environmental education into their teaching;
- encourage school districts and administrators to support these necessary changes;
- communicate to all Albertans the importance of modelling environmentally conscious behaviours—youth learn from watching adults;
- communicate to all Albertans (adults and youth) that recycling does very little when it comes to solving environmental problems—government policies and consumer habits need to change; and
- help Alberta decision-makers understand that environmental education is a key strategic tool, and that well-educated children and youth are the key to environmental sustainability.

The ACEE is working with teachers and all other environmental education stakeholders to create a **2010 Framework to Advance Environmental Education**. Find out more at www.abcee.org, or contact executive director Gareth Thomson at gareth@abcee.org.

About the Poll

- In March 2010, Ipsos Reid conducted an online survey for the ACEE of 248 high school students and 211 older youths (18–24 years old). Margin of error is 4.6 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.
- Download the full report from www.abcee.org.