



Beyond the classroom: Tips for establishing a successful Eco-Group

By Susan Lindsay and Erica Young

If your school doesn't have an Eco-Group, now is the time. Eco-Groups are a great way to bring environmental education out of the classroom and inspire youth to take action and connect with their passions. Here are some suggestions on how to successfully support an Eco-Group at your school.

Set the stage for success

Help get a group off to a good start by making sure they have access to a meeting space, support from their school administration, and can find resources and tools to enable them to successfully take action. Guide them in establishing group norms and meeting procedures. By no means do you need to know everything; there are many resources out there for a group to draw on. Visit www.lsf-ist.ca/en/projects/youth-taking-action/links-for-youth for starters.

"Have a regular schedule for your meetings. This might seem trivial, but I can say from first-hand experience this is important." -Nicholas Cherlet, Collège Béliveau

Set goals and get moving

Help the group decide what they want to accomplish over the year. Choose SMART goals; they should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and have a timeline. Break long-term goals down into manageable steps so you can achieve small successes along the way. Everyone should leave each meeting with a task that will help advance your project.

Empower student leadership

Allow students to lead meetings and projects. It's okay if they make mistakes; there is so much to be learned from dealing with challenges. Encourage the group to take advantage of each member's skills, knowledge, and passion so that everyone feels valuable and has a role to play.

"[T]he most important thing my teachers do is make sure the committee is producing student based projects that we were all a part of." –Megan Verrier, Vincent Massey Collegiate

Pick projects strategically

Select projects that everyone can get excited about. Brainstorm issues and activities that motivate and inspire the group. The best projects lead to a positive environmental change (like washable dishes in the cafeteria or more students walking to school) while at the same time, strengthening your group (for example by raising money, recruiting new volunteers or building the skills of your members).

Get connected

Finding out what other groups are up to can offer inspiration and opportunities to collaborate. The Manitoba Environmental Youth Network exists to link Eco-Groups to each other. Log on to www.mbecoyouth.org to tap into a wider community of youth taking action and attend GreenSpace, an environmental youth forum held every fall.

"[T]he teacher should keep searching for any opportunities for the students to participate [in events outside of the school], because as students we are very limited to this kind of information." – Maggie Wen, Miles Macdonell Collegiate

Plan for succession

You will need to prepare for student turnover and group sustainability so keep recruiting new students to join. Encourage the experienced students to pass on their knowledge to the next leaders. Get the group to document their activities, contacts, procedures, and achievements as they go.

"[T]eachers should encourage students to make sure their club has representatives from all grades. That way they can be sure that their committee will still exist years after the initial group of students has graduated."- Rachel Swatek, Kelvin High School

Make it fun

The fun factor will keep your group energized and positive. Start and end every year with a fun activity to help with group building and spirit. It is also important to incorporate fun in both the projects and meetings.

"Don't be too formal. Some organisation is needed, but make it too formal and people will rapidly loose interest". -Nicholas Cherlet, Collège Béliveau

The students quoted in this article are all active in Eco-Groups at their high schools. Susan Lindsay works with Climate Change Connection (www.climatechangeconnection.org) and Erica Young coordinates the Manitoba Environmental Youth Network (mbecoyouth.org). They would love to hear of your successes and help you navigate any challenges. Let them know what your school's Eco-Group is up to: erica@mbeconetwork.org and climate.connection@mts.net.