

Turning off the oil taps begins in the classroom

Sam Hammond

Earlier this year, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and his Canadian Energy Centre drew ire from many for the way they used the province's tax dollars to fight the release of a children's movie that showed the fictional destruction of the pristine Alaskan wilderness by an evil oil and gas company. Now as much as I would prefer the Premier of Alberta to spend less on fighting Netflix children's movies and invest more resources to support his public sector workers, Mr. Kenney and his government were right in understanding one thing – children get it when it comes to climate change.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) has numerous commitments, set by our membership, regarding climate change. As educators, we recognize the value in teaching K-12 students about the negative impacts of climate change and the best way to mitigate them.

Teachers have led the way before on issues that governments found themselves lagging. The profession has often empowered those seeking social justice and equity, helping to solidify and amplify their voices far and wide.

Now, we must do the same for climate justice. As is the case with education in Canada, the power lies with the provinces and territories. Right now, there are few jurisdictions with formal climate change education as part of their curriculum – this needs to change. We see how much teachers, students, and their families care about the air they breathe, the water they drink, and about an uncertain future. In September 2019, during what now seems like another reality, millions of Canadians, many of them students, marched to push for systemic change regarding climate change. A majority of Canadians who voted in the 2021 federal election supported parties with climate change commitments at the core of their platform. We know that this is critical. That's why it's imperative that climate change education must be an integral part of formal curricula in every jurisdiction in Canada.

As I have learned during my time as a leader, a top-down approach doesn't work. The CTF/FCE recognizes the commitments highlighted by Canada at COP26 and we celebrate them – capping emissions is a start but a real commitment to setting a more sustainable, long-term path forward begins by educating people on the challenges that climate change brings and the kinds of actions and shifts in thinking we need to address the reality of a warming planet. As our attention shifts from Glasgow to Parliament Hill, I'm hopeful that climate change continues to be a priority focus for all Canadians. There needs to be a serious plan put forward by provinces and territories regarding climate

change education in collaboration with Indigenous leaders and knowledge-keepers, climate scientists, students, and educators leading those conversations. We encourage the federal government to find ways to work with Premiers and Ministers of Education to incorporate the realities of climate change and how to mitigate it into day-to-day learning.

Teachers have an altruistic commitment to equipping their students with the best tools to tackle an uncertain future. Unfortunately, we have already let our children down with the way we have mishandled the climate crisis up to this point, so now our focus must turn towards providing them with the knowledge and abilities to avoid the mistakes of previous generations.

Having an environmentalist as Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change is a start; an indication that the federal government is taking the threats of global warming seriously. And as the latest oil sands news makes clear, the PR war to silence citizens' voices is losing ground while public support for keeping the oil buried is only getting stronger. But the pathway to a sustainable future travels through the classroom.

It would be difficult to find schools where teachers do not address climate change and environmental challenges; most of the time at their own initiative, and increasingly at the initiative of their students. But the success of any change to a curriculum comes down to the teacher's ability and freedom to integrate it into the lesson plan.

At the CTF/FCE, we know that teachers must be given both the professional space and teaching and learning tools to not only include sustainable development lessons, but to properly adapt them to their own methods and geographic realities across this vast country.

The moment to shine a light on the importance that education plays in not only preparing the next generation to live with a rapidly changing climate, but to hopefully empower them to alter our ways to live a more sustainable existence on Earth is now.