

## **Earth Day and eco-friendly schools**

By Jane Whiting

This year is the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, and on April 22, nearly every Canadian school child will celebrate with a variety of environment-friendly events and projects.

**What is Earth Day?** According to Earth Day Canada, it is the largest, most celebrated environmental event worldwide. Approximately 500 million people in over 180 countries stage events and projects to address local environmental issues. Although Earth Day is primarily celebrated on April 22 some countries use the date of the Vernal Equinox (March 20 or 21), which marks the moment that spring begins in the northern hemisphere and autumn in the southern hemisphere.

**How did Earth Day originate?** The concept of Earth Day began in the spring of 1970 and originated in San Francisco, California. It was supported by the United Nations and became a global initiative in 1971. April 22 was also first celebrated as Earth Day in 1970 by twenty million Americans, most of them students, with activities to emphasize the importance of the environment and raise awareness of the destruction of the earth's natural preserves. The hope was to start an environmental movement that would alter industrial practices and human consumption, which led to clean air and water acts in the US and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Since then, the date is an occasion for people around the world to celebrate the earth and renew their commitment to building a safer, healthier and cleaner world. Although Earth Day is not a statutory holiday, it has helped Canadians realize that they can and should do something to protect the environment.

**What do local schools do to be earth-friendly?** Over the years, Ottawa-Carleton schools have made great efforts to implement environmentally friendly practices, both inside and outside the classroom, with the help of various eco/educational programs and associations. Earth Day Ottawa is a local non-profit affiliate that aims to motivate youth to improve the state of the environment by taking positive action. The organization hosts Earth Week events, sponsors contests in the community and provides environmental information to schools and the public.

**How do kids learn about the environment in the classroom?** Most schools implement waste reduction and energy saving policies such as litter-less lunches, and use energysaving light bulbs, in addition to reusing and recycling a variety of materials. They also promote earth-friendly learning throughout the school with year-round educational projects, and teach environmental education as part of the Ontario elementary curriculum for science and technology, social studies, history and geography. During Earth Week, the teaching focus typically includes more hands-on involvement and activities connected to creating and sustaining a healthy and green school environment.

**What happens in the playground?** There is an increasing emphasis on natural landscapes and healthy school settings, with more teachers, students and parents participating in annual free schoolyard greening workshops, provided by local school boards in partnership with the Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds Program. Through a series of workshops, the primary role of the program is to improve the health and well-being of school children by creating better places for them to play, socialize and learn. It aims to inform and involve them in planning and implementing greening projects around the school.

**How does this make a difference at school?** Consultants with the Evergreen program refer to studies that show green schools and playgrounds promote physical activity, cooperative play, stronger social skills, better academic performance and less stress, fewer discipline problems and absenteeism. Schools not only play an important role in teaching children about healthy lifestyle choices, but by involving them in the process of creating interesting outdoor spaces to provide a safe place to play and connect with nature, it also works to build school pride and a sense of belonging to the community.

**Where can I get more information on school greening projects?** Evergreen claims to have the most comprehensive and extensive school-ground greening program in Canada, as a result of their ongoing partnership and funding with Toyota Canada. They can provide useful information on how to organize a school greening group; how to plan, design and sustain a school playground project; plus fundraising ideas to pay for landscaping and tree planting costs. Many other earth-friendly projects, eco-activities to do at home and environmental teaching tips can be obtained from contacting organizations such as Earth Day Canada and Earth Day Ottawa, either directly or through their websites.

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