

Canada • Belfountain 'Learning for a Sustainable Future School'

A special thanks to Janice Haines, Pamela Gibson, and Learning for a Sustainable Future for this contribution

In Canada a charity, [Learning for a Sustainable Future](#) (LSF)¹¹⁹, has taken a lead role in promoting national support for climate change and sustainability education. This is no easy task as in Canada there is no national Department of Education. Instead, each of the 10 provinces and 3 territories have their own Departments of Education and their own curricula. While many include curriculum outcomes related to sustainable development and the environment, these vary widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The pan-Canadian oversight for education is provided by The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), an intergovernmental body made up of the 13 Ministers of Education. It serves as a forum to discuss policy issues and undertake activities, projects, and initiatives in areas of mutual interest. CMEC is the

organisation responsible for coordinating Canada's response to SDG 4, including SDG 4.7: [Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development](#)¹²⁰. To date, they have not identified sustainable development as a priority area of mutual interest.

This lack of unified government action towards education for sustainability in Canada leaves non-government organisations like LSF to take the lead. Working with businesses, governments, school boards, universities, communities, educators, and youth across Canada, **LSF acts as a connector, a resource, and a facilitator for change.** With financial support from the Federal and Provincial governments, foundations, and corporations, LSF takes a holistic, vertical approach to integrating sustainability and climate change education in Canada's school system. This means working with all levels of

Grade 6 in the Credit river working with an initiative to repatriate salmon



stakeholders including ministries of education, school boards, schools, teachers, youth and the community.

LSF's work can be seen at Belfountain Public School, a semi-rural public primary school in southern Ontario of 15 staff and 185 students. Belfountain has been collaborating with LSF since 2006, engaging in teacher professional development workshops, participating in student programs, and benefiting from LSF's extensive collection of sustainability teaching resources. Belfountain's 15-year journey also exemplifies how a small group of committed teachers can be the driving force behind sustainability-oriented education and can grow their efforts into a whole-school approach that is now supported by the entire community.

Through the 1990's and into the early 2000's the staff at Belfountain Public School were looking for a way of moving forward in pedagogy and practice. They wanted to move towards a bigger vision of education, one that included

transformative teaching approaches such as inquiry-based, experiential, play and place-based, and problem-based learning, as well as integrated projects, a community lens, active citizenship, the arts, learning outdoors in nature and more. They began integrating elements of this vision into their practice with limited support from the administration and without a cohesive plan, but still had some encouraging success. In 2005, a group of parents approached Belfountain's principal with a simple request: "Please take our kids outside more." The principal brought the request to the superintendent of their school board and launched a pilot program where two teachers would bring their class outside for learning at least weekly. One of the teachers, Pamela Gibson, personally committed to taking the students out every day—and mostly succeeded!

Her colleague Janice Haines spent her maternity leave committed to finding like-minded organisations and individuals to help support the program. She found there were many amazing programs but few that focused on a

Key WSA Principles in action at *Belfountain primary school*

Capacity building

- Professional Development as well as both individual and collective coaching from an experienced teacher (provided by LSF through funders)
- Online capacity building tools created in partnership with LSF to support other schools to become 'Sustainable Future Schools', including 15minute presentations suitable for staff, administration, and parents, and a framework for schools to follow

Curriculum

- Following the LSF Sustainable Future School Framework which connects the curriculum to the SDG's, such as food drives and 'No Hunger', Food Waste, and Fast Fashion thematic topics
- Assessment: Strong focus on a broad range of assessment tools such as learning skills, anecdotal assessment, student questions, ideas and commitment, as well as more traditional forms of assessment

Community Connections

- Community integrated projects like the Garlic Mustard Festival, Fashion takes Action (kindergarten), and Just eat it Caledon - Food Waste Challenge (k-6)
- UN Goals Project -SDG 14 Life Below Water - with schools across the world. When making connections to organisations doing great things outside of the school all learning strategies work together to produce significant outcomes for students. For example, anti-Idling campaign, paint a rain barrel

Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination

- An agreement has been signed by the school and LSF, with support from the Board, to commit to a whole school sustainability focus. This is supported by the staff and the school community who actively support the values and principles of the whole school sustainability approach

Pedagogy & Learning

- LSF, with annual support from funders, has created "Learning Inside Out" a weekly collection of easy-to-use learning activities for grades K-12, with themes focused on getting outside, and the SDGs (which cover everything from climate change to equity)
- Real World Connections: Outside on the school grounds and in the community as well as having community members come to the school

Institutional Practices

- 'Walking the talk' and change in practices has been a 15+ year journey and is still ongoing. This includes seasonally linked activities such as, garbage audits, composting and energy monitoring (lower heat sweater days etc)
- This work also links into the wider community with examples of the school effecting change within the community, like planting trees/shrubs for species of special concern, rewilding, stream restoration, signage and removing invasive species

whole school approach in a public-school setting. Pamela describes this pilot year as a turning point for the school, which since then has been heavily focused on outdoor learning, the environment, and the community:

“That year was transformational! We worked with caretaking staff and the superintendent of operations to make changes on the playground and shift the way kids used the property. It was not always easy. I like to say that there were many issues that we faced and worked through as a team. We measured our success by the empowerment of students, the satisfaction of parents, improved attendance, and a rise in provincial standardised testing scores (Education Quality and Accountability Office, EQAO). It was a year when students and teachers alike were happy to come to school and hated to miss it! It was clear to me (and always had been) that this was the way forward. At the end of the year staff, students, parents, and administration were in agreement to roll out this approach school-wide and so the Belfountain ECO focus (Environment, Community, Outdoors) began” (Pamela Gibson).

For the next ten years, Pamela and Janice continued to drive the sustainability education focus at Belfountain in collaboration with fellow staff members and with support from LSF. There were ups and downs as not all staff members, administrators and parents were always

supportive. However, by working with LSF, Pamela and Janice were able to bring in professional development workshops showing educators how to effectively use transformative learning strategies that combined forms of inquiry-based and project-based learning with learning outdoors. Staff took advantage of LSF’s wealth of curriculum-connected sustainability resources to begin connecting environmental issues to their subjects and grade levels. Support for sustainability education grew among the staff and spread to the wider school community and beyond.

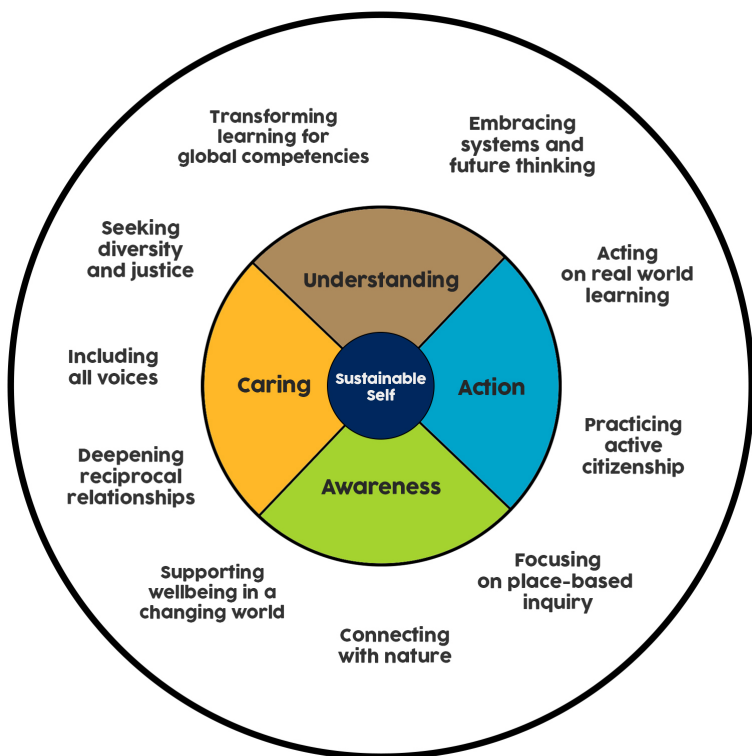
Eventually Pamela and Janice’s passion for sustainability education led them beyond spearheading the efforts at Belfountain Public School to working part-time for LSF helping other educators across Canada start similar movements at their own schools.

In 2019, LSF and Belfountain Public School, with private funding support from a corporation [3M Canada](#), embarked on a new partnership to create the [Sustainable Future School](#)¹²¹, Canada’s first whole-school approach to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. With Lynn Bristoll as principal (and big supporter), Janice still teaching the students directly, motivating from within, and leading by example, and Pamela as mentor to support the staff, they began to reimagine curriculum through the lens of the SDGs. What has remained consistent is taking kids outside and developing relationships with community partners.

As the pilot Sustainable Future School, Belfountain dedicated a lot of time in the 2019/2020 school year to creating a shared vision that staff, administrators and the School Board would support. The SDG’s aligned with the School Board’s goals of equity, diversity and inclusion. The development and signing of an agreement between LSF and the School, with support from the School Board, acknowledged the importance of the sustainability approach and gave it new credibility for all staff members.

While COVID-19 and online learning brought on many challenges in 2020, it served to underscore the importance of learning outdoors for students’ physical safety and mental health. The pandemic also brought home the interconnectedness of our global community and provided insight into what can be achieved when we work together. When staff and students returned to school, it was with a renewed commitment to their whole-school approach to the SDGs. As Pamela describes it:

“We returned to the ‘Sustainable Future School’ way of teaching and learning, getting kids outside for much of the day.” Everyone supported the institution of a ‘Showcase’ of student learning every 6 weeks, where students tell the story of their learning through visuals, songs, skits, pictures, videos and more, making their learning visible. Pamela supported staff



LSF’s Sustainable Future Schools Framework provides a circular structure allowing schools and classrooms to start anywhere

through mentoring, informal idea generation, and formal professional development integrated into staff meetings and tailored to needs and interests. Belfountain staff were invited and encouraged to participate in LSF's professional development webinars on topics like outdoor learning, teaching using the SDGs, and more" (Pamela Gibson).

Teachers have the freedom to incorporate different SDGs throughout the year depending on the grade level of their students and the curriculum they're investigating, but there is always an emphasis on connecting learning to the real world and having a positive impact through sustainability Action Projects. This can range from grappling with food waste through vermicomposting, using schoolyard erosion to learn about climate change adaptation, removing invasive species in the community, to saving energy at school and at home; Belfountain students' learning translates to tangible change.

Pamela and Janice's leadership, LSF's support, and the commitment from the school administration and the School Board to the whole-school approach have unified the school culture around sustainability.

"As a Sustainable Future School, we have found our purpose. Sustainability is where our heart is. Every part of the school community is involved—one parent became so interested in sustainability that she sourced a book on the topic from the UK, ordered copies for every class, and even arranged for the author to do a virtual reading for the students!" (Lynn Bristoll, former Principal, Belfountain Public School).

This school offers a wealth of practical examples of how a WSA can be established. A small, dedicated group of teachers was able to influence a greater focus on sustainability education at their school. And a dedicated, holistic approach with support from all levels of administration has fundamentally transformed their school culture. As an LSF Sustainable Future School, Belfountain also considers the SDGs throughout hiring practices, when possible, as well as through the school operations, facilities updates, and teaching and learning at every level.

Sustainable Future Schools Framework • At the heart of LSF's framework is the "Sustainable Self", meaning that every individual child in our care at school, the student's growth and well-being, is put at the centre of the learning community. Students build awareness, caring relationships with others and with nature, learn new skills and knowledge — all in support of taking action to better their lives and communities. The outer circle are the ten Elements of Practice that educators need for this 'Change in Approach'. More details are found in an [article by Susan Elliot](#)¹²² about a WSA to teaching the UN SDGs.

"We 'walk the talk' by bridging the all-too-common gap between pedagogy and practice. We just get outside and 'do it'!

Whole school traction may be gradual, but it begins by walking outside the school door!" (Pamela Gibson).

The following examples from the school illustrate WSA principles in action:

1. Removing the invasive species garlic mustard on the school grounds with Grade four. The students spent time replanting native trees and shrubs in the local conservation area with the Credit Valley Conservation Authority¹²³. SDG Connection - #11, 13, 15, 17.
2. The kindergarten (grade 3) participating in a community Food Waste Challenge. They designed posters and created a video to help promote the challenge in their community. Students also grow food in Spring to experience the benefits and challenges and better relate to wasting food. (In partnership with Eco Caledon's 'Just Eat it' challenge¹²⁴) SDG Connection - #2, 3, 12.

Grade 4 removing invasive species / Grade 3 student poster who participated in community Food Waste Challenge



Grade 4 study the health of the river and local river habitat



Kindergarten students planting food after learning about the food waste challenge and talking to a local farmer about the challenges of growing food



3. The primary school (Grade 4) studied the health of the river and local river habitat. Through research and observation, they discovered that the river supports many different creatures and human activity poses problems for these creatures (e.g. litter, rising water temperatures, and pollution). They decided to raise salmon eggs and reintroduce them to the river to support native populations. (In partnership with Credit Valley Conservation Authority and Ontario Streams -led by Andrea Broersm).
4. Grade 6 class conducted studies in the Credit River to repatriate salmon together with the Ministry of Natural Resources Ontario and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. SDG's Connection -#6,11,14,17.

Belfountain school provides a comprehensive example of how a WSA that utilises the context of the SDG's can provide a school, and their local community with meaningful action-oriented activities that combine multiple forms of learning and utilise the outdoors. Belfountain school also shows the power of a few dedicated and persistent individuals whose enthusiasm and resilience can become contagious and eventually sparks the many stakeholders in and around the school. Collaboration with a NGO, like LSF, also helped the school's progression towards a WSA by providing inspiring and practical resources for both teachers and students. Private sector funding also proved to be helpful. The case also shows the importance of starting learning for sustainability with very basic localized and existential questions like: "What's going on out here?" Think about curriculum, become aware and ask questions, look at issues and find community organizations involved in sustainable practices and partner with them on a community project. Connect everything to sustainability and the SDG's.

Strengths/prospects

- Individual educators are committed, a strong and committed parent community, administrators who support their staff and the school focus on sustainability
- Using a broad range of learning grounds, strategies, multiple intelligences and diverse perspectives to tap into student strengths and interests
- Partnering with community organisations with a sustainability focus makes learning authentic, rich, deep and meaningful

Challenges

- Changeovers in staff (due predominantly to hiring practices) challenge the cohesion of our staff, and our collective values, purpose and resolve
- More administrative and coordination support is needed
- Changes in the School Board personnel that occur challenge the focus and effectiveness of our school's direction
- This is a slow process