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Columnists

Opinion: Alberta's draft curriculum needs to equip students for climate change

Kathy Worobec, Jennifer Janzen, Stephen MacKinnon
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Students and supporters rally during the Global Climate Strike at the Alberta Legislature in Edmonton, on Friday, Sept. 27, 2019. Thousands of students across the country joined together to call for action on climate change. PHOTO BY IAN KUCERAK /Postmedia

You've heard a lot about Alberta's draft K-6 curriculum, especially the social studies content but what about the environment, energy and climate change content?





The Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE) convened a working group with Alberta Tomorrow, GreenLearning, students from the Alberta Youth Leaders for Environmental Education and other partners to conduct a comprehensive review of the K-6 curriculum draft on these topics. The group's hopes for a strengthened modern-day curriculum; one that sufficiently equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary to confront the significant challenges of climate change and other human impacts on our environment, was not delivered and needs revision.

Research compiled by the North American Association of Environmental Education and Stanford University found clear evidence that environmental education provides a variety of benefits to students, including improved academic performance and the social and emotional benefits of learning in nature — something that was even more evident during COVID. Recent Alberta youth polling and focus group research provided further evidence of the urgent need and student demand for this education — over two-thirds of our youth agree that climate change should be a high priority in schools. As one student stated, “... we don't know how we can help, and then everybody keeps putting it on us like ‘All right, figure it out.’ But we don't know how to figure it out”

If students are to be at all prepared for the complex and challenging issues that await them in their future, they will need to be instructed, in an interdisciplinary fashion, on the worldwide threat posed by human-made climate change, along with gaining the skills and agency to be part of the solution. As Sasha Adamova, a Grade 10 student in Calgary, has stated, “[this] education is essential, now more than ever, if we want my generation to grow up hopeful, and full of ideas for the future.”

The group outlined recommendations for the draft K-6 curriculum and focused on three subjects: science, social studies and physical education and wellness. Jennifer Janzen, the executive director of Alberta Tomorrow, points out a fundamental principle of environmental education that is missing, “... a strong emphasis on the fact that all our actions affect the air, water and wildlife. Our actions affect biodiversity, climate change, and the resources our economy depends on.”

The group identified the following recommendations:

- Increasing educational opportunities that prioritize environmental solutions and promote students taking action to provide students with the skills to address these complex issues and give them hope;
- Less focus on knowledge and more emphasis on skills, attitudes and behaviours integral to environmental education such as critical thinking and systems thinking;
- Increasing opportunities for cross-curricular or interdisciplinary learning to ensure students understand the interconnections of Earth and human systems;
- Ensuring Indigenous perspectives, especially for environmental topics (connection, kinship, and stewardship of the land, land reclamation, ecological restoration) are provided as integral learning not just as add-ons;
- Emphasizing learning in nature/the outdoors in all grades and subjects not just in physical education and wellness to improve academic performance, personal well-being, social skills development, ecological understanding and engagement in learning.

Kathy Worobec of ACEE stated, “We appreciated the efforts made to add some of the content outlined in the Curriculum for a Sustainable Future in the draft curriculum but it was scattered across grades and missed some of the core principles specifically that humans are part of nature and that we rely on Earth’s systems to provide clean water, clean air, healthy soil and a climate that makes this planet liveable for humans.”

Let’s all ensure Alberta Education delivers a better K-6 curriculum so that Alberta’s over 700,000 students are prepared for their future — a future in which they will face many challenges as they strive for reliable and affordable energy, a healthy and diverse environment and economic prosperity. And

most importantly, give them hope for their future.

Kathy Worobec is senior education advisor for Alberta Council for Environmental Education.

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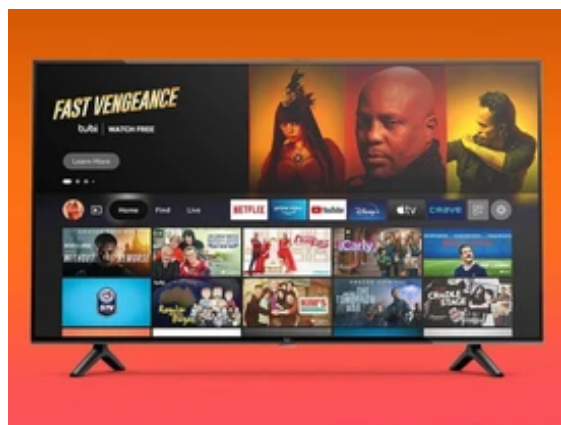


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