

November 1, 2022

To the Saanich School Board:

We are a group of Saanich staff who care for the Earth and our students, and who want to see our schools as places where we can take pride that we are 'walking the talk' and taking action in the face of a [climate emergency](#). We owe this to our future generations, and right now we feel that our district is not doing enough. Our students face many [mental health challenges](#) and the future health of our planet through climate change and our own wasteful practices has created a world where [climate anxiety has become common](#). The Saanich School Board has yet to declare a climate emergency, but we all know we are in one.

One of the most visible ways that students get a sense of whether we are 'walking the talk' in environmental sustainability is through our waste practices. A coordinated approach and plan that works towards eliminating waste would show students the people in the Saanich School District are committed to environmental leadership and collaboration. So far, we feel we are letting our students down. The [Hartland Landfill is nearly full](#). Kitchen & food scraps are considered [banned substances](#) and are prohibited by the CRD. We are not in compliance with current CRD policy and are likely subjecting [Waste Management Inc. \(WM\) to ticketing. We are either being fined or paying an additional fee for pickup](#). Organic waste not only fills space at the landfill but releases methane, a contributor to greenhouse gasses. While compost pickup is permitted through our contract with Waste Management, Inc. (WM) it is often not encouraged in our schools as it is not specifically in anyone's employment description that we know of. Where composting does happen, it is done because of the heroic efforts of students with a few staff members who remove compost bins after school hours. It is a gross job and it is one that we should all be tackling together, not just a few local environmental champions within each school. Composting and recycling is no longer something only heroes do, it is a basic expectation in our society. Therefore, we are not simply missing the opportunity to model something of importance for our environment, we are blatantly neglecting our responsibility to do so.

Recycling and zero waste practices within our schools are also minimal and again, up to each school's environmental champions to tackle. There was a time when items other than returnables were sorted but many schools no longer do any recycling except for paper or bottles for a deposit refund. Some schools have made arrangements with some other contractors for pickups of soft plastics etc.; however, these practices are piecemeal in the district and not systemic. Some elementary and middle schools are doing better where there are environmental 'clubs' or local champions, but these programs often dissolve when a champion leaves. We feel there is an absence of district leadership and more systemic change is needed.

Our district has recently published our new strategic plan with 4 pillars: Literacy, Indigenous Learner Success, Mental Health & Wellness, and Global Citizenship. Improving our waste practices touches on 3 of these pillars and is particularly important in global citizenship. In the document it states in the section on Our Beliefs that:

**Public schools have the responsibility to prepare young people to be active, participatory members of the community who contribute to a healthy, diverse, socially responsible and environmentally sustainable society.**

**We share responsibility for the health of our planet. Our schools, in the way they function and in the many ways learning occurs, must highlight environmental stewardship.**

We share these beliefs and are happy to see them reflected in our new strategic plan. We thank those who have done the work to put these words into our plan. As stated by both Dave Eberwein and Bruce Underwood at our recent Indigenous Learning Day on September 23, 2022, this strategic plan is a living document and one that we should hold in our hands and use to help guide our practice. This is not something we should take lightly as a district. The plan is something that we should implement and put money towards so we can say we achieved the goals we set out. We look forward to working together to carry these words on the page into real action. Our waste is one place to start along with actions such as building and bussing emissions reductions. We need a sustainability task force to lay out steps and goals and monitor progress. There are many other school districts with sustainability plans to help us with this!

We support recreating district wide initiatives that assist ALL schools to work towards zero waste with adequate support for these programs and monitoring that can allow us to track and improve this initiative. We are very aware of many of the systemic issues that led to the previous failures but let's not let that stop us from beginning to find solutions. We would like to help create this new program and system and create a culture of environmental stewardship and pride in our schools. A place where students and staff take ownership of their learning and their actions towards the Earth. Please feel free to connect with us, as many of us have years of experience being the local champions in the schools and know the pitfalls that can happen when implementing this program.

Here are some of our key learnings so far:

- Litterless lunch seems to work fairly well at elementary & middle school levels but has been unsuccessful at the highschool level (we have cafeterias & mobile students)
- Composting of paper towel & accumulated yard waste are easy to do, don't attract pests and could be done on site or at a central site within the district.
- Recycling and the cleaning & contamination issue for lunch items is onerous and requires training students, staff and prioritizing it for it to work (i.e. appropriate bins, cleaning supplies and sinks, staffing emphasis)
- The whole school needs to be in on the project, not just the "environmental champions" and consistent yearly training is needed as well as measurement to track improvements.
- We value our custodians and know that they are already busy. There needs to be a solution that does not 'add on' to their existing jobs but supports new roles at facility levels.

We recommend the following for setting up a successful program.

### **Immediate Action Ideas**

- Create a working group of school staff and district staff to help develop a program with targets, support and best practices. As well, coordination should ensure that consistent practices are implemented in all schools. A 'policies and practices for schools' document should be created for administration, teaching and custodial staff (Release time for leadership meetings and staff training is needed).
- Create a staff training day for administration (Vice Principals often are tasked with the waste topic) & custodial & teaching staff.
- Help schools and the district set goals and targets and create systems to allow for monitoring, tracking and reporting so we can continue to improve the system.
- Conduct a waste audit of schools and facilities.
- Consult with Hartland landfill to sit in on a meeting with our group & district board.
- Consult with W̱SÁNEĆ leadership council to sit in on a meeting.
- Consult with Zero Waste initiatives (such as Royal Roads, Sustainability Saanich & One Planet Saanich, the Road to Zero Waste, etc. to come into school and give presentations, workshops, learning resources).

### **Actions for a climate action and sustainability plan**

- That this waste topic be part of a larger sustainability plan. See the [Vancouver School Districts's plan](#) for a great example of how this could be implemented.
- Create a paid coordinator position with continuous funding that allows for training, mentoring and tracking of the program and the waste streams.
- Suggest curricular tie-ins so that many classes are participating (i.e. not just the "compost club" or learning services doing the work) like biology, social studies, culinary arts, junior sciences, environmental science, woodworking, or all classrooms

We really want this initiative to succeed. Waste is such a visible part of the student's environmental experience and changes will encourage environmental leadership and be a source of pride and empowerment for everyone.

We look forward to hearing from you and to making a better future together.

Sincerely,

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**and other supporters whose signatures are below:**

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