

ROBERT CHRISTIE

GAINING GROUND:

The Power and Potential of School Ground Greening in the Toronto District School Board

by Janet E. Dymont, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

About This Report

Gaining Ground presents the findings of a 2003 study that systematically investigated the influence and potential of green school grounds in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The report was commissioned by Evergreen, a charitable organization whose mission is to bring communities and nature together for the benefit of both. *Gaining Ground* explores the impacts of greening initiatives on curriculum delivery and teaching practices, as well as on student learning, behaviour, play and environmental awareness. It also considers issues of social inclusion, health and safety. In so doing, it identifies the major challenges and opportunities that must be addressed to realize the full potential of greening.

The study took place in Toronto, Canada, a city of 2.48 million people of kaleidoscopic ethnic diversity. It included 45 elementary, middle and high schools in the TDSB, the country's largest school board, with 558 operating schools. It involved 149 parents, teachers and principals through questionnaires and/or interviews.

"Everyone can join us in the garden. What a great place for a disenfranchised child to meet new people, dig and plant. Our garden is colour-blind, inclusive and warm. Anyone can help us, and they do." (Parent)



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Gaining Ground

This report presents clear evidence that green school grounds in the TDSB are a significant asset. They positively influence many aspects of students' educational experiences, including their learning, their social interactions, their health and safety and their environmental awareness. Green school grounds have the potential to enrich the quality of life, education and the environment for present and future generations of young people.

Key Challenges and Opportunities

While the evidence gathered clearly points to the benefits of greening, the study revealed undeniable challenges as well. Many study participants felt that teachers were not using the green school ground nearly as much or as effectively as they could. They identified challenges such as fundraising, grounds design and maintenance, and teachers' unfamiliarity with delivering the curriculum and managing classes outdoors. To meet these challenges, participants expressed the need for professional development, curriculum resources and wider, more consistent institutional support for those who want to teach on the school ground.



An art class comes alive outside, inspired by the variety of shape and colour of found leaves.

Impacts of Green School Grounds in the TDSB

This study demonstrates that the impacts of greening initiatives in the TDSB are both broad-ranging and encouraging. Particularly striking is that the benefits described emerged across the board. Regardless of the differences among the schools and projects studied, participants perceived the following positive impacts:

- Teachers were able to deliver a broad range of subjects in the outdoor classroom created through greening projects.
- Student learning was enhanced on green school grounds.
- Teachers had renewed enthusiasm for teaching and were using a wide variety of innovative instructional strategies on green school grounds.
- Students demonstrated more positive social behaviour when learning and playing on green school grounds.
- The diversity of play spaces created through greening projects suited a wider array of students than conventional turf and asphalt school grounds.
- Green school grounds promoted the social inclusion of all people, irrespective of gender, race, class or intellectual ability.
- Green school grounds were safer and healthier spaces for students.
- Green school grounds promoted environmental awareness and stewardship.



Children's engagement in learning soars when they make real connections between nature and subjects like science and math.

"When I am teaching outside, I feel excited again...I realize that I still have a lot of passion for teaching."

(Teacher)

Green school grounds provide students with experience in planning, designing, planting and maintaining a garden, laying a foundation for caring about the land and understanding the interconnectedness of living systems.



Recommendations

The following general recommendations identify opportunities for change and are offered as reference points for decision-makers and advocates of green school grounds:

1 Policy Development

As this study indicates, institutional endorsement of greening initiatives is crucial to their long-term success. High-level support at the provincial policy level, for example, would provide a stable, recognized commitment to guide Ontario's College of Teachers, Faculties of Education, school boards, administrators and teachers.

- Recommendations
- The Ontario Ministry of Education should officially recognize, at the policy level, the educational, social and ecological benefits of hands-on, outdoor learning on green school grounds.
 - The policies developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education should support and promote school ground greening initiatives by addressing issues related to funding, training and curriculum.

2 Curriculum Development

The mandated Ontario curriculum does not explicitly endorse or support the use of school grounds for curriculum delivery. This study indicates that without such explicit endorsement and guidance, teachers are discouraged from using the school ground for hands-on, outdoor learning.

- Recommendations
- The Ontario Ministry of Education should ensure that curriculum policy documents explicitly recognize the value of hands-on, outdoor learning and provide concrete examples of how the curriculum can be delivered on school grounds.
 - The Ontario Ministry of Education, in conjunction with school boards across the province, should ensure that curricular resources are developed to facilitate the delivery of the mandated curriculum on school grounds.

3 Teacher Education

This study reveals that many teachers in the TDSB lack the skills and confidence to use the school ground for outdoor learning. While the TDSB currently offers a series of workshops on green school grounds, many study participants reported that they were either unaware of the workshops, unable to participate, or wanted more workshops. Without adequate professional development to address such challenges as project design and maintenance and delivering the curriculum outdoors, green school grounds will remain an underused resource.

- Recommendations
- **Faculties of Education** should recognize the value of hands-on, outdoor learning and provide professional development opportunities for student teachers and practising teachers who wish to engage in greening initiatives and make full use of the educational potential of school grounds.
 - **The TDSB and school boards** across the province should provide professional development opportunities for practising teachers who wish to engage in greening initiatives and make full use of the educational potential of school grounds.

4 School Board Initiatives

As described in this study, a variety of new initiatives within the TDSB (Ecoschools Program, Evergreen-TDSB Partnership) are fostering the recognition and support needed to more fully realize the promise of green school grounds. These leading-edge initiatives provide a model for school boards across the province.

- Recommendations
- The TDSB should continue to expand planning and design support for green school grounds to ensure that Master Plan designs and school-initiated projects incorporate practical, sustainable and engaging design elements, as well as long-term maintenance plans. School boards across the province should follow this lead.
 - School boards should elevate the importance of green school grounds in terms of funding priorities, given their many benefits and the harsh reality that many schools that want to improve their school grounds are limited by their ability to raise funds.

Conclusion

The diversity of schools and projects examined in this study demonstrates that greening in the TDSB holds tremendous promise. The findings are in keeping with the benefits and potential described by researchers of greening initiatives elsewhere in Canada and internationally. *Gaining Ground* is thus of interest not only to students, teachers, parents and administrators within the TDSB, but also to school communities, school boards and provincial ministries of education across Canada and around the world.

To download a free copy of the full *Gaining Ground* report, go to www.evergreen.ca, click on [Learning Grounds](#), then [Our Resources](#), then [Research](#).

Data management takes on new meaning when students measure real leaves on real trees.



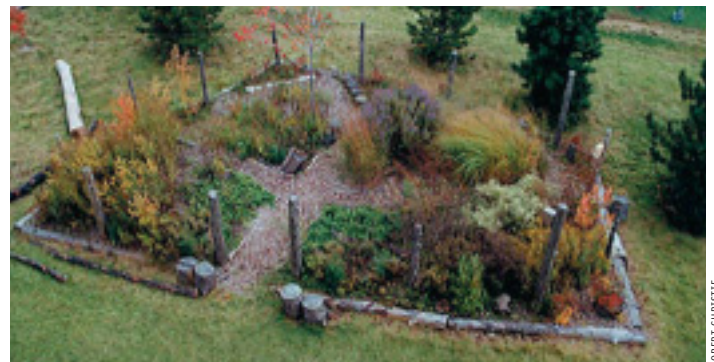
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◀ Art meets nature in these student-designed mosaic tiles.

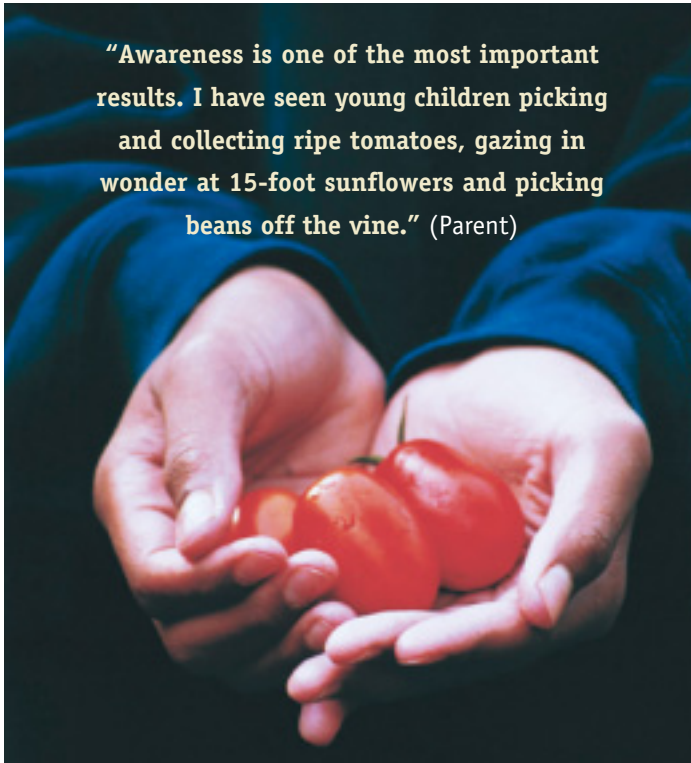


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▼ A wildflower and butterfly garden is an oasis of colour and calm in an urban school ground.



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"Awareness is one of the most important results. I have seen young children picking and collecting ripe tomatoes, gazing in wonder at 15-foot sunflowers and picking beans off the vine." (Parent)



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