

# GreenLearning - eCards

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## Environmental Citizenship

Are you an active citizen? Do you want to be? Do you care about what happens in your school, your community, your country, and beyond? Most people care about what happens to them, their family, and their friends, but they don't always take action to make positive change in the world.

We all have rights and responsibilities as Canadian citizens. You also have rights and responsibilities as an environmental citizen. Some argue that your right to clean water, clean air, and a safe energy supply are basic human rights. As with all rights and freedoms, citizens need to work to protect them. Nobody forces us to do our duty as Canadian citizens — we do not even have compulsory voting as some countries do. Many citizens would claim, however, that it is our unspoken duty to stand up for our rights and our environment. That's certainly how the students in this video see it: the members of SWITCH take their responsibility as environmental citizens seriously.

Environmental citizenship means getting involved in the very survival of our world and our society. Climate change, energy shortages, and a host of other global issues cry out for us to speak up and take action. Some say that when it comes to environmental problems, if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem. The consequences of inaction and indifference can be disastrous.

Some say that becoming active never accomplishes anything, but we can counter such arguments with facts. Imagine walking down the street in the segregated south of the United States in the early 1960s when no black person had the vote, and discrimination against people of colour was common. If someone had told you that within a couple of generations, a person of colour would be President of the United States, you likely would not have believed it. But that is exactly what happened.

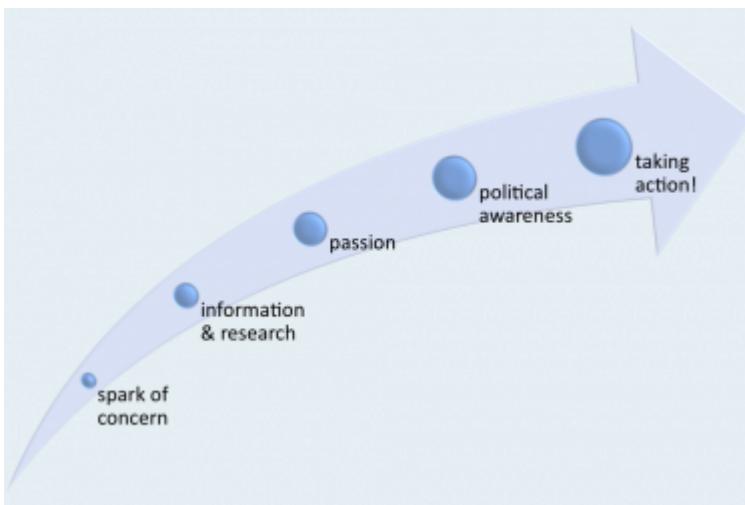
When faced with injustice and other human crises, active citizens have won many victories. Victories such as ending slavery, eradicating smallpox, intervening in wars, changing constitutions, ending discrimination, and overturning dictators have all come about at least partly through the actions of ordinary citizens like you. You can have an impact on a place as close to you as your school or neighbourhood, or work with a group that has provincial, national, or global reach. There are many ways to get involved, and many skills that you will learn if you do.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

~ Margaret Mead, 1901-1978

### The Process

Becoming an environmental citizen is a process. Everyone has their own unique story about what led them to get involved and take action, but the process of becoming active typically looks like this.



The students in the introductory video shared a real concern for the environment. They wondered if there was a way for Toronto schools to reduce their ecological footprint. Motivated to know more, they researched whether their school could install a solar collector. With the help of one of their teachers, the students not only learned about solar energy, they also learned how to navigate the political process that would get their idea approved.

The students formed SWITCH (Solar and Wind Initiatives Towards Change), developed an action plan, and recruited more members. After many months of hard work and fun, SWITCH achieved great success. SWITCH installed 52 solar panels on the roof of their school, William Lyon Mackenzie Collegiate Institute, featured here. Impressively, their efforts made their school the first in the Toronto District School Board to produce its own renewable energy!

SWITCH's impact continues: in 2011, the Toronto District School Board and AMP Solar Group Inc. teamed up to install solar panels on as many as 450 school rooftops. The deal could amount to \$1.1 billion in green electricity generation over 20 years.<sup>1</sup>

One of the founding members of SWITCH describes the key steps the group took:

1. Establish a need. What would improve the current situation? Reduction of energy and cost savings, sustainability, more diverse curriculum.
2. Conduct research. What do we need to understand to participate in this issue? Policy/rules, funding, issues/science/technology involved, process, people, system, alternatives, expansion/existing projects, levels of involvement, timeline.
3. Inform others and do outreach. How will we get the word out? Media, events, in-school engagement/education, social networking.
4. Define deliverables. How will we know when we have achieved our goals? Project achieved, sense of ownership, acknowledgements/credit, celebrate!
5. Plan for the future and follow-up. What next? Coming events, maintenance, future goals, expansion, end the organization when everything's been done.



Solar panels installed on William Lyon Mackenzie Collegiate Institute. Photo credit: Cachelan WebFilm

Of course, an event that includes David Suzuki and Steven Page makes a fine addition to any process!

## A spark of concern

Thousands of people across Canada are active environmental citizens. Most started with some spark of concern. This is what happened with the students who formed SWITCH.

SWITCH began as a handful of concerned students who were inspired to make a difference. They wanted to do something about the environmental problems that face us today. A teacher advisor and one student got things started with a discussion about the need for clean energy. SWITCH set its goal “to generate renewable energy for Toronto District School Board (TDSB) schools and, eventually, throughout the province of Ontario.”<sup>2</sup> At that time, their local school board (the TDSB) had its own unique but related concerns. It was concerned with the lack of environmental education for students, the growing demand that its schools were placing on the energy system in Ontario, and rising energy costs.

A key reason why SWITCH was so successful was that it united different people who shared similar and overlapping concerns. With support from students, parents, the school board, the media, and the school, SWITCH was able to come up with a plan that addressed everyone’s concerns while at the same time educating the community and inspiring others into meaningful action.

## Getting informed

The first step in turning a spark of concern into action is to become informed. This means researching the issue and learning how it fits into the world of politics. The students who founded SWITCH turned their renewable energy dream into reality by learning a whole lot about the issue and the workings of politics at their board of education.

As an active citizen, you will:

- Learn how to research. With a good library and Internet research skills, you can move beyond a basic Google search. You can learn advanced search functions for the Internet and talk to your school or local librarian about commercial services they can access.
- Learn where to research. You can learn which sources of environmental information are most reliable. To keep current, you might subscribe to the newsletters of leading groups or non-governmental organizations or follow their blogs.
- Develop a good bias detector. You can learn how to separate credible information from questionable information. You can also learn to detect when a politician, official, or the media is trying to spin a story to make themselves, a cause, or an organization look better.

### 1. Knowing levels of government

When you are working on an environmental issue, you need to find out which level of government to target. Energy and the environment are both federal and provincial responsibilities in the Constitution. The federal government has power over national energy concerns such as creating national energy policies, regulating pipelines, and passing pollution laws. The federal government also decides what commitments, if any, Canada will make in international negotiations such as those of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Provincial governments have power over local energy decisions such as which sources of energy to develop and use, and the distribution and pricing of energy for commercial and private customers. Provinces rely on different combinations of energy sources depending on what's available and on levels of development. Ontario, for example, relies more than any other province on nuclear power. Local governments are also involved in issues surrounding energy and the environment. The delivery of energy is the responsibility of local governments and agencies, and decisions at this level can be significant.

Energy and environmental issues are increasingly a part of global decision-making. Some international leaders believe that energy security is even more important than the fight against terrorism. Global climate change conferences are seen as key ways to address trans-national problems.

## 2. Learning where to exert political pressure

Recognizing what motivates politicians and governments to act helps you determine where best to exert pressure in our political system. Governments often want to do what is right, but they need to do what they can afford, and they are highly motivated to do what will get them re-elected.

All political parties now claim to have strong environmental positions in their platforms, and they all discuss energy and environmental issues at election time. This is partly driven by the reliance of political parties on polls. Polls have been used to ask Canadians about their attitudes on the issues and about their voting preferences since the 1950s. Over the last decade, political parties have been accused of relying too much on polls and of changing their platforms whenever a poll shows a change in voter opinion.

Recent polls have captured the growing importance of the environment in the minds of Canadians. Consider these results from a 2009 poll:

- 67% of those asked said the environment should be just as much a priority for governments as tackling economic problems.
- The vast majority of respondents felt governments were not doing enough on the environment.
- 73% said they were making more of an effort to be environmentally conscious in their behaviour than they were a year ago.
- 71% said that environmental issues are becoming more important to them personally than they were a few years ago.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of the Green Party in Canada also attests to growing concern for the environment in the minds of Canadian voters.

While polls and votes are important, we exert political pressure in many other ways as well. For example:

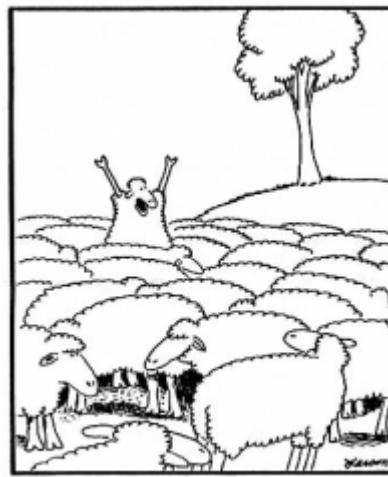
- The student council votes to coordinate a school celebration of Earth Day.
- An Ojibwe Band Council supports a proposed hydro-electric project in their area.
- A Girl Guide or Boy Scout group decides to raise money to protect a nearby wetland.
- A condominium board of directors votes to go with Bullfrog Power (a provider of green energy) as their electricity provider.
- Neighbours join together in a ratepayers' association to purchase discounted solar installations.

Wherever there is decision-making around environmental issues, there are opportunities to exert political pressure.

## 3. Understanding environmental legislation

As you get informed, you need to get to know how environmental legislation is made. Politicians at all levels of government pass hundreds of laws and regulations every year. Energy and environmental concerns are an increasing part of these decisions. Some laws and regulations are *restrictive*, setting limits on car emissions or establishing penalties for air pollution, for example. Others are *incentives*, and reward citizens for making environmentally friendly choices — through energy rebates, for example. Germany has used taxes and incentives to very strongly support its shift to renewable energy.

## 4. Getting to know ENGOs



Click for larger image. Credit: Gary Larson



When working on an environmental issue, you also learn about the many organizations outside formal government circles that help shape the energy and environmental future of Canada. Some would say that environmental non-governmental organizations — also called ENGOs — are where a lot of the most effective political activity takes place. These voluntary and non-profit organizations help form what is sometimes called *civil society*. Such groups can exist at many levels, from the local to the international. We see groups as small as a school eco-club and as big as the Canada-wide groups that regularly make the news, such as Pollution Probe, Ducks Unlimited, the Pembina Institute, and the David Suzuki Foundation. There are also international ENGOs such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund for Nature.

Thousands of Canadians belong to such organizations. The Canadian Environmental Network now includes 600 different groups from across Canada. You can even find green pages on the Internet. ENGOs educate Canadians about the issues. They make use of everything from newspaper and television advertisements to direct mail campaigns, conferences, websites, blogs, and videos. Some ENGOs work directly with the environment by planting trees or cleaning up streams. Others focus on lobbying politicians and other decision-makers. As in the case of this eCards project, other ENGOs focus on empowering young people by improving environmental education.



There may be one victory on the horizon for active environmental citizens. ENGOs like EcoJustice and others have been fighting for a Canadian Environmental Bill of Rights. More than 130 countries already have this kind of legislation. Parliament in Ottawa has been pushed to act. Bill C-469 would include such benefits as:

- the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment
- the right to access to environmental information
- the right to participate in environmental decision-making
- the right to request review of policies, regulations and laws
- access to justice — the right of all Canadians to bring a legal action before the courts
- whistleblower protection.

Whistleblower provision would protect people like Dr. John O'Connor. He is an Alberta doctor who discovered high rates of rare cancers among residents of Fort Chipewyan near the Athabasca oil sands. The Canadian Medical Association responded to what they said were attempts to muzzle him. They demanded protection for doctors who speak out about health concerns.

## Navigating the political system

Becoming an environmental citizen also teaches you how politics works. You learn how to navigate the system to get your ideas heard and supported. The youth at SWITCH learned a lot by navigating the politics of TDSB. Much of what they learned can also be applied to other organizations, such as governments and corporations.

Some of the key political lessons learned by the students of SWITCH include:

- Know your audience. For example, since some members of a school board are elected while others are appointed or hired, SWITCH used different methods of persuasion for different people.
- One united voice is louder than scattered individual ones. A school board's main responsibility is to provide an education to the communities it serves, not to listen to requests from every



individual or group. SWITCH found that bringing many stakeholders together — students, parents, and other community members — in support of one issue was much more powerful than involving only one student group.

- Learn the concept of framing. To know how to frame an issue is to know how to present it in a way that is convincing to your audience. When making decisions, a school board has to take into consideration cost, benefits, project lifetime, research that still needs to be done, time and staff commitments, policies, safety, alternatives, and how well an idea fits into its current and future goals. SWITCH had to really understand the needs, concerns, and goals of the TDSB. Then, the students had to present their ideas in ways that addressed those needs, concerns, and goals.
- Use current expectations to your benefit. The environmental status of an organization like the TDSB, especially as a provider of education, matters. It is an important factor in how the board is viewed by the public and other important organizations like government funders. SWITCH let the board see that by supporting its cause, the board would serve its own interests.
- Use social trends to your benefit. In recent years, renewable energy and sustainability have become more integrated across the curriculum and school board practices. SWITCH could use the board's existing initiative as groundwork for its success. By supporting SWITCH's priorities, the board could help meet its own priorities.
- Know what resources already exist. Conduct research to see if there are ways to make the cost more appealing. SWITCH identified government benefits that the TDSB could take advantage of — such as Ontario's Feed-in Tariff (FIT) program and a City of Toronto no-interest loan. SWITCH also researched local companies and explored economies of scale, payback periods, and profit. SWITCH presented a solid argument to the TDSB, one that made the relatively high up-front costs reasonable over the long-term.
- Create a sense of ownership. Making sure that everyone involved with the project feels appreciated. When people feel a sense of ownership, they work harder and they attract more people to participate.
- Recognize that everyone has something to offer. People have different skills and different time commitments. Welcoming all kinds of contributions helped SWITCH attract all the help it needed.



Participants in the EcoFest Marathon. Photo credit: photographybyolivia.com

## Taking action

When your spark of concern turns into a passion supported by knowledge and political awareness, you are ready to take action. In taking action you will:

- Remain optimistic that people, communities, and countries can change.
- Think of your issue as a marketing challenge. Who is opposed to your point of view and what could make them change their minds? Who is in favour of your ideas and how can you best use their support?
- Be precise about who you are lobbying. The person you need to reach could be a politician, a government bureaucrat, a company executive. Be sure to target the right person.

- Learn to communicate effectively. Effective communication involves good public speaking as well as persuasive letters, newspaper articles, email messages, and good social networking.
- Be persistent yet also patient.
- Celebrate your successes!

## How can you take action?

Consider these four strategies for getting involved and making positive change:

- 1. Lobby**
- 2. Join an Organization**
- 3. Vote and Participate in Elections**
- 4. Consume Strategically**

**Click each strategy to learn more.** Which one best suits you?

Whatever your personal style, there is a place for you as an active environmental citizen! Whether you want to lobby, join an environmental organization, work on a political campaign, or exercise your power as a consumer, you will make a difference. To get more involved, you may consider a career as an environmental citizen. For example, you could work for an ENGO, become an environmental lawyer, cover environmental stories as a journalist, or teach environmental science. Start your journey by making a dynamite eCard!

## Environmental Citizen Action Checklist

1. Start with caring for others and for the earth.
2. Learn how to research.
3. Learn where to research.
4. Develop a good bias detector.
5. Learn which level of government to target.
6. Find out where to exert pressure in our political system.
7. Acquaint yourself with how environmental legislation is made.
8. Learn about the many organizations outside of formal government circles that shape Canada's energy and environmental future.
9. Know who your audience is.
10. Realize that one united voice is louder than scattered individual ones.
11. Understand the process and the concerns of your audience.
12. Use current social trends and expectations to your benefit.
13. Know what resources already exist.
14. Create a sense of ownership.
15. Learn that everyone has something to offer.
16. Understand the concept of *framing*.
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19. Communicate effectively.
20. Be persistent yet patient.