

Using Student Voice to Promote Sustainability in the School Community

Ellen Bees (École Golden Gate Middle School, Winnipeg)

Abstract

I will describe the importance of student voice in promoting sustainability within a school context. In particular, I will chronicle the growth of a Sustainable Development Committee from a teacher directed group to a student-led organization. Two examples of student-directed sustainability projects at École Golden Gate Middle School will be examined. The first project, a student campaign to introduce compostable cutlery into the school cafeteria, had larger implications on our school's waste disposal practices. The second project involved students envisioning and planting a butterfly garden on school property.

With both projects, students were provided with the opportunity to select an environmental issue of importance to them, and then take action to make their local school community more sustainable. The significance of these opportunities in promoting sustainable living, both on a personal level and a communal level, will be emphasized.

As well, I intend to link student voice and sustainability with divergent conceptions of citizenship. In particular, I will emphasize the role of the social justice oriented citizen, as envisioned by Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, where socially oriented citizens consider the root causes of problems and endeavor to reach a solution. I contend this conception should be expanded to sustainability-oriented citizens. To effectively develop such citizens, students should be given opportunities to speak out against issues pertaining to sustainability and social justice at school, and work collaboratively with staff to reach solutions. In doing so, students will be given the tools to promote sustainable living and well-being.