



# Local Climate Action Program for High School Students in Atlantic Canada

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper draws on educational theory, environmental education literature, and real-world examples of successful education and youth engagement programs on climate change to craft a proposal for the development and implementation of a local climate action program for high school students in Atlantic Canada. This paper builds an argument supporting the development of such a program and lays out how it could be developed and carried out in conjunction with local high schools and youth organizations. The program would help high school students build the skills and knowledge needed to engage with their municipal elected officials and community members to inspire positive environmental change by grounding them in understandings of the impacts that climate change has and will have on their homes and communities, and how climate change exacerbates injustice. The students would participate in workshops on anti-oppression, understanding local political processes (particularly focusing on the impacts of the climate crisis on marginalized communities and the intersections of the climate crisis and systemic oppression), and they would carry out a local climate action project working with local municipal councillors, staff, and organizations. The overall goal of the proposed program would be to equip youth with the skills to hold their leaders and communities to account by engaging in the political process and work to combat systemic oppression while also improving local responses to the climate crisis through policy change and program development.

Keywords: Youth Engagement; Environmental Education; Climate Action; Program

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## Background and Goals

The lack of good quality and meaningful civic education in schools is an issue that has plagued communities for years (Feldman et al., 2007; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Research in

education has shown through engagement with the theory of sociopolitical development and social cognitive theory that civic education is most effective when the school climate is democratic, civic discussions on pertinent societal issues take place, the school atmosphere is fair, and the students have the opportunity to directly contribute to the civic process (Lenzi et al., 2014) through volunteering, activism, and service to their communities (Feldman et al., 2007). Civic engagement is a key component to stimulating transformative social change, and to succeed, citizens must feel that their contributions are valued and contribute to decision making (Brulle, 2010). To do so, citizens need to feel engaged in collective efforts for systemic change to improve the economic and social conditions to account for equity and human needs (Brulle, 2010). A case study of the “Power Dialogue Program” in the United States that engaged students in contributions to state-level energy policy found that the shift from a focus on individual behaviour change to one of collective action was key to stimulating student interest and involvement in civic society around the issue of climate change (Buckland et al., 2018). Furthermore, while numerous studies have reported on youth dissatisfaction with politics and cynicism about the potential for change, a review of youth participation in politics found that youth, especially those in marginalized communities, are passionate about and likely to protest issues that affect them and their communities (Bynner & Ashford, 1994). Clearly, there is a need for well-intentioned and effective civic education in schools focused on real-world issues directly impacting students.

Local communities are incredibly important in the global fight against climate change. Municipalities and other local governments have jurisdiction over many of the sources of greenhouse gas emissions and can easily reduce and regulate them (Dale et al., 2020).

Additionally, local governments are more closely connected to the communities that they serve and can more effectively identify potential paths for transformative change since they operate at levels at which the impacts of the climate crisis are most likely to be experienced (Dale et al., 2020). Local governments also tend to be more accessible to their citizens, making it easier to form meaningful relationships (Dale et al., 2020).

Case studies of cities that have had to rapidly respond to climate disasters (New York City in the United States and Cape Town in South Africa) have found, however, that the adaptation of the cities in response to disasters have re-entrenched systemic inequality and placed the burden on racialized and working poor communities (Bigger & Millington, 2020). Racialized communities, in particular, are often burdened with the adverse impacts of fossil fuels and the climate crisis, and many of these instances of climate injustice are experienced at the local community level (Loyola University Chicago School of Law & Gonzalez, 2020). Additionally, the risks of climate induced migration have stimulated white fear leading to increased xenophobia and militarization in response to repel, detain, and deport migrants and refugees (Loyola University Chicago School of Law & Gonzalez, 2020). Students from diverse communities and backgrounds will have varied experiences with the climate crisis, and the impacts that their communities will face will differ but could provide specific issues of relevance for them to mobilize around (Nxumalo & Ross, 2019).

The climate crisis is one of the greatest threats facing humanity, particularly younger generations, and a climate action program in schools could serve as a way to both catalyze action on the climate crisis and stimulate youth civic engagement for decades to come. The overarching

goal of this program would be to empower youth to engage civically through advocating for improvements to local climate policy and action. Additionally, the program would aim to:

- Inform climate change policy at the local level through diverse youth perspectives.
- Increase youth involvement in the local decision making on climate change to protect their future.
- Educate youth on the climate crisis and civic processes.
- Provide youth with the tools and resources to advocate for changes in their local communities.

This program would work with high-schools and community youth organizations to integrate a semester-long program with community climate and social justice activist facilitators from outside the school focused on local climate action. Climate change is a multifaceted issue threatening all aspects of society making it crucial to examine from multiple viewpoints (Siegener & Stapert, 2020). The program would engage students through multiple different subject lenses including science, geography, social studies, languages, and maths. The program would consist of four primary components: teaching and discussion of local political processes, the climate crisis (particularly focusing on the impacts of the climate crisis on marginalized communities and the intersections of the climate crisis and systemic oppression) and anti-oppression training, the development of community action projects at the local level relating to the climate crisis, and collaboration with local municipal councillors, staff, and organizations to implement those projects (Lenzi et al., 2014). The students will learn skills on presenting to local council, meeting with elected officials, teamwork, speaking to the media, and storytelling and their projects will

directly contribute to the democratic process and action on the climate crisis (*Announcing YEA! Campaigns, Youth-Led Climate Action Program*, 2020). The students will be exposed to guest sessions and lessons from community leaders from diverse perspectives including, but not limited to, racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, and newcomer communities to encourage and nurture cognitive, psychosocial, and social growth (Lenzi et al., 2014). Additionally, students would be encouraged to consider how the communities in which they live could be impacted by climate change, and to focus on projects that would directly impact their communities.

One of the shortfalls of this strategy is that youth may be more disengaged from the program when they are made to do it as a part of their classes. Although the literature explains that civic education programs are often most successful when they are integrated into formal schooling, school-based civic education programs can be heavily influenced by the administration, funding available to the school, and the willingness of the teachers, leading to an unbalance in the civic education received by students of different classes (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). To combat this shortfall, the program would be offered free of charge to the schools, and I would work to build partnerships with other organizations in target communities before working to bring it into a school to have more community support (taking the load off teachers and school staff). Another potential shortfall is that the span of time proposed for the program would not be long enough to see any policy change through. To combat this challenge, I would work with the partnered schools and community organizations to hold follow up sessions every couple months, and to ensure that the municipalities or other decision-making bodies commit to engaging the students in advising their projects through to implementation.

## **Demographic**

This program will focus on engaging with high-school students through school and community-based programs. Studies of social identity and psychosocial development state that youth define their social identity in late adolescence, and their experiences at high-school ages majorly influence their orientation away from or towards civic and political participation (Yates & Youniss, 1998). Furthermore, high-school is the highest level of free public education in North America and many other countries, and so it is a crucial time in citizen development to educate on civic issues (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). This program will be a school and community-based program with existing community organizations working with youth as studies have found programs that are integrated into formal and pre-existing curriculum and youth programming to be more effective (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Civic education programs are best when they increase the capacity of youth to be effective as civic actors, and create a community of practice and care around relevant social and environmental issues (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Some crucial considerations when working with high-school students within the school system are the challenges of working within pre-existing curriculum, the challenges that teachers may face in integrating the program to their classroom, and the pushback by administration and parents (Siegner & Stapert, 2020).

## **Messaging**

The overarching theme of the messaging for this program will be that youth can make a difference in local policy and effectively contribute to decision-making on the climate crisis, on their future, and issues pertaining to their communities. It will focus on “challenge” messaging

that presents the climate crisis as a challenge/obstacle that can be overcome through collective community power (Brulle, 2010). The messaging will also emphasize the fact that local governments and communities are crucial in the fight against the climate crisis, and that local, grassroots community action can make a major difference. Some of the messaging that might be used to appeal directly to youth participants in initial outreach would be:

- Are you scared for your future? Do you wish that you could imagine a future without the climate crisis? Learn how to enact real change at the local level and transform your community to be more sustainable!
- What issues is YOUR community facing that will be made worse by the climate crisis? Do you have access to healthy food? Good jobs? Safe living conditions? Bring these issues forward to your local council and make a difference for yours and future generations!
- The climate crisis exacerbates social issues, advocating for improved social conditions IS advocating for action on the climate crisis!
- Your representatives work for you, it is THEIR job to act on the climate crisis, let us help you gain the skills to push them to do their jobs and protect your future!
- Join us to learn how to survive the climate apocalypse; or better yet, prevent it!

## **Education & Communication Strategy**

Although the intent is to have a multi-month program for high school students in schools and community organizations, the first outreach will be done through pilot workshops in classrooms and youth programs. Outreach will be done both through social media (to connect with the youth directly) (Boulianne et al., 2020), to environmental clubs at high-schools and youth climate movements, and to the teachers and community leaders in person and/or over the phone. I would work on building collaborative partnerships with a few youth-focused and/or led organizations and environmentally oriented teachers initially to work towards implementing a larger scale program. To ensure any long-term sustainability of such a program, there would need to be partnerships in place to continue the work and extend its reach to more youth. This collaborative partnership would start early on in the first iteration of the program to receive input and direction from youth focused and led organizations, as well as environmentally and social justice-oriented teachers, who would help to build the program so that it would meaningfully support the work already being done and work to complement and enhance it.

### **Accessibility**

While this program aims to engage and educate as many youths as possible about participating in civic society and the public sphere, I recognize that not all youth or students will be in situations in which they can safely and comfortably publicly denounce or interact with public officials. Students/youth who feel unsafe meeting with or lobbying elected officials would not have to, but they would still be able to participate in the workshops and learn the skills they would need to do so. Additionally, materials for the program would be available in French and could be translated to other languages for communities whose first language are not English or French,



including Indigenous languages. Should there be any students who needed it, an ASL interpreter would be available. As mentioned throughout my proposal, the program heavily focuses on including an intersectional lens to the climate crisis and its impact on marginalized communities, so I aim to have the program be accessible and meaningful to all youth. To ensure that the youth feel that the program is serving their needs, I will elicit feedback anonymously multiple times (Carleton-Hug & Hug, 2010) throughout the program to ensure that youth are able to provide feedback on sensitive issues without fear of discovery. Furthermore, I will work to ensure that the workshops and sessions are safe spaces by co-creating a community code of conduct with participants, applying an anti-oppression framework to all components including the process of “calling in”, and having a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination of any form. “Calling in” entails informing someone if they said or did something that hurt others either by using offensive language, or acted in a way that negatively impacted someone else. This process discusses with them why what they did or said was an issue and what they could do in the future instead in a collaborative manner that focuses on moving forward and improving the situation, rather than shaming someone (Ferguson, 2015).

### **Examples of Successful Public Education Programs**

#### ***Greenlearning Canada; Climate Change Where I Live Program***

The Climate Change Where I Live (CCWIL) program led by Greenlearning works with high-school students in grades 9-12 through partnerships with teachers in earth science, environmental science & studies, geography, and science (Johnston, n.d.). The program focuses on helping students gain the skills to investigate the impacts on climate change in their respective Local Climate Action Program

communities. Students are guided through a program to analyze and report on data on climate change and environmental impacts that leads them to consider both methods to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The students then collaborate to write and present formal report findings to elected officials and industry leaders. When I was in high school, I participated in the CCWIL program in Ontario. My high school was one of dozens that had students submit ideas for methods to mitigate and adapt to climate change in different aspects, and then I, along with multiple other writers, wrote a white paper report that we then presented to the provincial government with recommendations for climate action. The CCWIL program has led to many impactful solutions to climate change including a student in Ontario who lived with their family on a commercial berry farm who developed a climate change plan for the farm, and in Saanich, B.C., where students communicated research they undertook on how Saanich could become more resilient to climate change to the municipality, the BC Ministry of Transportation, and a local farmer. Similar to the CCWIL program, my proposed program would include an action-oriented component in which students design and carry out a climate action project and advocate for its implementation to elected officials. My proposed program, however, would specifically be tailored to the Atlantic provinces of Canada and would have more of a focus on regional issues and social justice.

### ***Youth Environmental Activists (YEA!) Campaigns***

YEA! Campaigns is a collaboration between iMatter and Climate Generation in the United States focused on youth-led action on climate justice at the city level (*Announcing YEA! Campaigns, Youth-Led Climate Action Program*, 2020). YEA! works with a state-wide network of Local Climate Action Program

partners and youth in Minnesota to provide opportunities for youth ages 13-18 to practice organizing and participating in civic engagement. They do this through helping the youth to create and lead a campaign around a climate justice issue to advocate for public and policy decisions to act on climate change. YEA! is entirely youth-led, with a major focus on supporting and advocating for the needs of marginalized communities. They carry out the program online and aim to help youth gain leadership skills, collaborate with local communities, and work to implement systemic changes within school boards, cities/townships, counties, or other local bodies to tackle the climate crisis. All components of the program are carried out by youth leaders and peer mentorship. My program will aim to draw on the climate justice framework used by YEA! and will focus on systemic changes as solutions to the climate crisis. Additionally, a key aspect of my program will be mentorship from community leaders and activists, including youth activists, to help youth gain skills and confidence in their abilities.

## **Conclusion**

School-based climate action programs continue to multiply and improve as the urgency of the climate crisis increases. Climate action programs with a focus on local governance and solutions provide the opportunity for youth to make a positive impact directly to their community and to the global fight against climate change while providing them with skills, resources, and knowledge about civic processes. Climate change civic education programs have the ability to foster political participation and encourage youth leaders from diverse communities to participate in the civic world and push for transformative systemic change.

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