

**Section III – Items for the Information of the Natural Science and Education Committee**

**TO:** Chair and Members of the Natural Science and Education Committee  
Monday, September 23, 2024 Meeting

**FROM:** Darryl Gray, Director, Education and Training

**RE: UPDATE ON PEEL ECOSCHOOLS PROGRAM**

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**KEY ISSUE**

To provide an update on Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's (TRCA) Peel EcoSchools Program to the Natural Science and Education Committee (NSEC).

**RECOMMENDATION:**

**IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT the Update on Peel EcoSchools program, be received.**

**BACKGROUND**

TRCA has been engaged by the Region of Peel to undertake a number of initiatives related to climate change mitigation and adaptation in Peel Region. Since 2008, the Peel District School Board (PDSB) and the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB) have been supported in their efforts to manage environmental sustainability at their boards utilizing the EcoSchools Canada certification framework. TRCA's Peel EcoSchools program fosters capacity-building across all board departments and within school communities by providing experience and expertise within the regional context to both schools and school boards.

EcoSchools Canada, previously known as Ontario EcoSchools, is the Canadian National Operator of the international EcoSchools program which is overseen by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). The mandate of EcoSchools Canada is to nurture environmental leaders, reduce the ecological impact of schools, and build environmentally responsible school communities. This is achieved through their certification framework which is linked to K-12 curriculum across Canada and aligns closely with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN

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SDGs). At the foundation of the program is the certification framework which supports and enables students and educators across Canada to build customized certification plans from a library of over 50+ unique environmental actions. The EcoSchools Canada Certification program provides an effective and collaborative framework for leading and supporting environmental initiatives within the education sector.

### History of EcoSchools

The EcoSchools program was first launched by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2003, as a way to promote environmental education and action, and improve how their schools and school grounds were designed and used. Since this time, TRCA, a founding partner of the program, has been actively engaged and involved in the development and advancement of the EcoSchools program.

In 2006, the program was adapted and expanded to become Ontario EcoSchools. Previously operating under an informal steering committee of curriculum and facilities central staff from seven school boards, as well as representatives from TRCA and York University, the relationship was defined through a Memorandum of Understanding which provided the framework for these independent institutions to come together and formalize a governance, management and administration structure, including individual and collective agency commitment, roles and responsibilities.

Also in 2006, TRCA became a participant in the program as a way to formally showcase its efforts in sustainability. In June 2006, TRCA's education facilities attained certification, becoming the first Conservation Authority and non-school board to achieve certification. The Village at Black Creek also became the first museum to achieve EcoSchools Certification that year.

In 2019, EcoSchools Canada began a nationwide expansion bringing the program to school communities across the country and becoming the Canadian representative for the UNESCO-endorsed Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). The national program was officially rolled out to schools in September 2020 and featured the launch of a new online certification platform.

Since the beginning, TRCA has actively promoted uptake of the EcoSchools program within all boards of education in TRCA jurisdiction as

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well as across other Conservation Authorities. TRCA continues to be actively involved in the EcoSchools program offering insight regarding program development, delivery, and strategic planning as a core member of the EcoSchools Program Advisory Committee (EPAC).

### Peel EcoSchools Program

TRCAs Peel EcoSchools program is a collaborative initiative with the Region of Peel, Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board and Peel District School Board. It offers opportunities to build environmentally responsible schools by connecting local climate change knowledge and awareness with curriculum and through the lens of the EcoSchools Canada Certification framework.

To support certification efforts by schools, TRCAs Peel EcoSchools program provides professional development workshops, certification training, one-on-one coaching sessions, access to educational experiences for students, and funding to schools for activities that directly support certification and climate change action through the Peel EcoSchools Grant initiative.

TRCA works closely with staff at the school boards to guide the implementation of the Peel EcoSchools program within their respective boards. A collaborative approach to project management is a guiding principle of the program and ensures that it is customized and adapted to meet the needs of the school boards and participating schools as well as those of the Region of Peel and TRCA.

At the school level, schools apply for EcoSchools Canada certification by undertaking environmental actions, campaigns, and projects, and then recording them in an online certification application platform to earn points towards their certification goal. At the end of the year, applications are assessed and are awarded a final certification level from bronze to platinum. There is also a participation level for schools who are just beginning their journey towards EcoSchools certification. The program builds momentum and capacity within the school through the dedicated efforts of an EcoTeam, supported by the leadership and contributions of numerous school staff, caretakers and administrators.

In 2021, through a partnership agreement with EcoSchools Canada, TRCA began work to establish a tailored certification application for Peel schools. TRCA is in the third year of implementation of the EcoSchools Canada's

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Regional User Experience for Peel Region schools. An initial review of all action cards was completed by TRCA and school board partners to incorporate board-specific content and opportunities to ensure links and information were relevant. Through consultation with partners, links to local content were added including resources for the Region of Peel, City of Mississauga, City of Brampton, Town of Caledon and Credit Valley Conservation. Action cards are reviewed and updated on an annual basis to ensure information remains up to date and applicable. Additionally, staff collaborate with partners to actively promote and integrate Peel EcoSchools into both partner-led initiatives, as well as other education programs and projects within TRCA.

Four new Peel-specific action cards have been created and added to the certification action card library as follows:

**Peel Water Story** (Launched Sep 2022 in partnership with the Region of Peel): This action card teaches students about local water systems and the journey of water in Peel.

**Community Stewardship in Peel** (Launched Sep 2023): This action card focuses on opportunities for schools to take care of nature outside of school property within the Region of Peel. Examples include tree and shrub planting and maintenance, wildlife habitat installation/maintenance and invasive species removal.

**Walking and Rolling in Peel** (Launched Sep 2023): This action card teaches students about active and safe school travel and, through local activities and campaigns, encourages low-carbon transportation options to school such as walking, cycling, scootering, public transportation, and carpooling.

**Flood Smart in Peel** (to be launched Sep 2024 in partnership with Credit Valley Conservation): This action card teaches why floods happen, what is in place to reduce the impacts of flooding in communities and includes an activity to track flood news and updates from flood forecasting and warning experts.

In May 2024, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) celebrated the 15th anniversary of the Peel EcoSchools program. This milestone event highlighted the culture of environmental stewardship and sustainability nurtured across Peel Region's school communities by dedicated school board staff and students.

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TRCA welcomed 120+ students, educators, school board staff, and trustees from Dufferin-Peel Catholic and Peel District School Boards to the celebrations which were held at Claireville Outdoor Education Centre. The event included site tours and hands-on activities focused on environmental leadership, climate change, and outdoor learning. A Gallery Walk highlighted the accomplishments of the certified EcoSchools in attendance. With the support of TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, attendees installed 410 trees and shrubs, each representing a school in the region—a powerful symbol of collective commitment to the environment.

Reflecting on notable Peel EcoSchool achievements since 2008, the impact is profound:

- TRCAs Peel EcoSchools program has supported schools in achieving their EcoSchools certification goals, with a total of 3,063 school certifications earned. 53% of certifying schools reached gold or platinum levels — the highest level of achievement possible.
- Over 2,925 teachers from the Dufferin-Peel Catholic and Peel District School Boards have benefited from various training and professional development opportunities offered through the Peel EcoSchools program.
- Since 2010, 315 grants totaling over \$85,000 have been awarded to certifying Peel schools to support environmental actions related to climate change. Projects have included creating pollinator and food gardens, community clean-ups, student EcoFairs and festivals, and the installation of anti-idling signs on school property.

The achievements of participating schools during the 2023-2024 school year demonstrate the program's ongoing success in Peel Region:

- 222 schools in Peel Region were certified as EcoSchools.
- 89% of certifying schools achieved a gold or platinum level.
- 6 new schools joined this year.
- 3.8K environmental actions were completed, with 48% of those actions reaching the whole school community.
- 5.3K student environmental leaders were engaged in school EcoTeams.
- 402K hours of outdoor learning took place, equivalent to almost 46 years.

### **RATIONALE**

TRCA's implementation of the Peel EcoSchools program incorporates opportunities to tailor initiatives and promote projects that align directly with internal and Region of Peel climate change priorities. It ensures that through the delivery of the EcoSchools program, environmental messages are consistently and accurately communicated with school communities across the region. This level of support for a school-based, integrated approach to addressing climate change is unique to the Peel EcoSchools program and exceptional within the EcoSchools Canada network.

Utilizing the funding support provided by the Region of Peel, the Peel EcoSchools program activates school communities to merge sustainability-minded facility operations and student learning with Regional and municipal goals and objectives around climate, waste reduction, active transportation, energy and water conservation, and community involvement. The program supports the advancement of positive facility and behaviour change within the educational services employment sector, which is one of the largest employment sectors in Peel Region and includes both school boards.

### **Relationship to TRCA's 2023-2034 Strategic Plan**

This report supports the following Pillars and Outcomes set forth in TRCA's 2023-2034 Strategic Plan:

#### **Pillar 3 Community Prosperity:**

3.3 Informed citizens are conservation champions

#### **Pillar 3 Community Prosperity:**

3.4 Inspired communities take environmental action

### **FINANCIAL DETAILS**

In 2007, Peel Region recognized the need to make significant investment in climate change adaptation and mitigation activities. Starting in 2008, this funding was significantly enhanced to support the implementation of special projects including the Peel EcoSchools program which has been funded annually since that time. The budget for the Peel EcoSchools program in 2024 is \$355,000. With the appropriate funding, opportunities exist for TRCA to develop and deliver support and programming like Peel EcoSchools within other school boards within TRCA's jurisdiction.

There are no financial implications or costs associated with this report.

### **DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE**

TRCA staff will continue to ensure that the Peel EcoSchools program remains relevant and that it continues to meet the needs of participating school boards as well as those of TRCA and the Region of Peel. In addition to launching the program for the 2024-25 school year, over the upcoming academic year, staff will lead the development of one more Peel-focused action card and will continue to work with EcoSchools Canada to determine next steps for the ongoing maintenance of the Regional User Experience for Peel Region schools. Staff will continue to actively promote and integrate Peel EcoSchools into other education project initiatives including exploring future opportunities to connect the program to TRCAs Partners in Project Green initiative.

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