

# Bring Us Together: The Sustainable Development Goals in the SLLC

By Jennifer Aston

## What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

In 2015, the United Nations launched 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which “provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future,” intending to achieve them by 2030 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, 2024).



Figure 1: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, 2024

In a time when many factors drive us apart or divide us, could focusing on, acting upon, and celebrating these sustainable development goals through the school library bring us together? What kind of impact would it have on a school culture and its students if these goals were at the core of all our activities in the library learning commons?

While progress is being made on several of the goals, it is evident that there are some goals that the United Nations has already determined cannot be achieved by 2030.

Recently, Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General for the United Nations, began his 2023 report with the following paragraph:

*Halfway to the deadline for the 2030 Agenda, the SDG Progress Report; Special Edition shows we are leaving more than half the world behind. Progress on more than 50 percent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 percent, it has stalled or gone into reverse. These include key targets on poverty, hunger and climate. Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda could become an epitaph for a world that might have been (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, 2023, p. 2).*

Furthermore, the UN releases a progress report on the goals each year. The 2023 report is a call to action. It begins with:

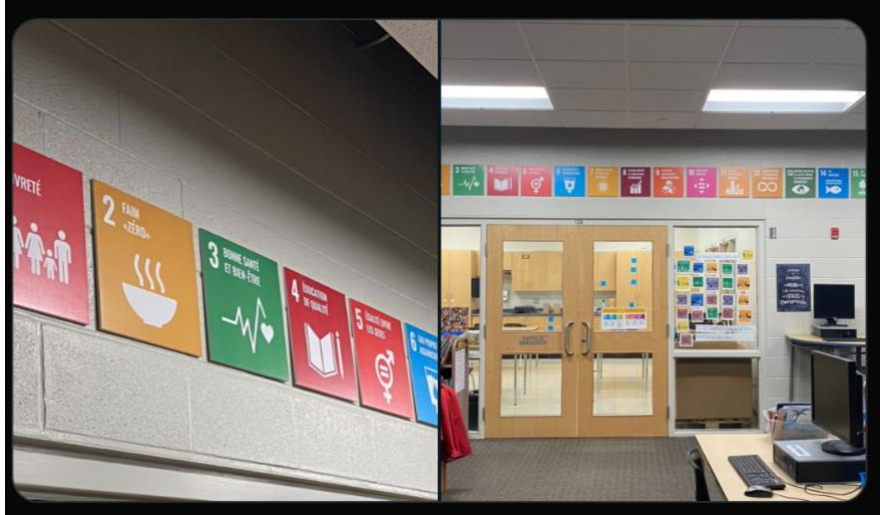
*Leave no one behind. That defining principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a shared promise by every country to work together to secure the rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy, thriving planet. But halfway to 2030, that promise is in peril. The Sustainable Development Goals are disappearing in the rear-view mirror, as is the hope and rights of current and future generations. A fundamental shift is needed – in commitment, solidarity, financing and action – to put the world on a better path. And it is needed now (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, 2023, p. 4).*

Now more than ever, it's crucial for teacher-librarians to take the lead in championing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in our schools, placing the SDGs at the heart of everything we do in our school library learning commons. In this paper, I aim to show how our work as librarians in school libraries is directly linked to these goals. But it's not enough to stop there—we must also integrate the SDGs into our partnerships, technology usage, and even the displays and upkeep of our collections. To illustrate this, I've included insights from students gathered through a recent survey. Their perspectives offer valuable guidance for us.

### **Where did this begin?**

Last spring, I ordered styrofoam-backed squares from Media Services, which I hung up prominently in the LLC. Having them posted there would remind me to connect projects on the go in the LLC with the goals. This week, I asked a group of Grade 3 students that were exploring vertical farming and creating devices to help some pole beans grow indoors using Micro:bits which Sustainable Development Goals were connected to their

work. They listed many connected goals (Zero Hunger, Responsible Consumption, Life on Land, Climate Action to name a few). They were also able to articulate their reasons for their choices.



However, soon I was inspired to go further than the visuals. This spring, with the help of some students, I created book bins for each goal containing fiction and non-fiction books. I have not labelled the books, I just go through my collection or get reminded of books that should go here or there as I am putting them away. It has created a lot more room on my non-fiction shelves and I have placed the bins in and around this area. This simple initiative has not only made our library more organized but also sparked a new interest in our students to explore the SDGs through reading. It's a small step, but it's a step in the right direction.

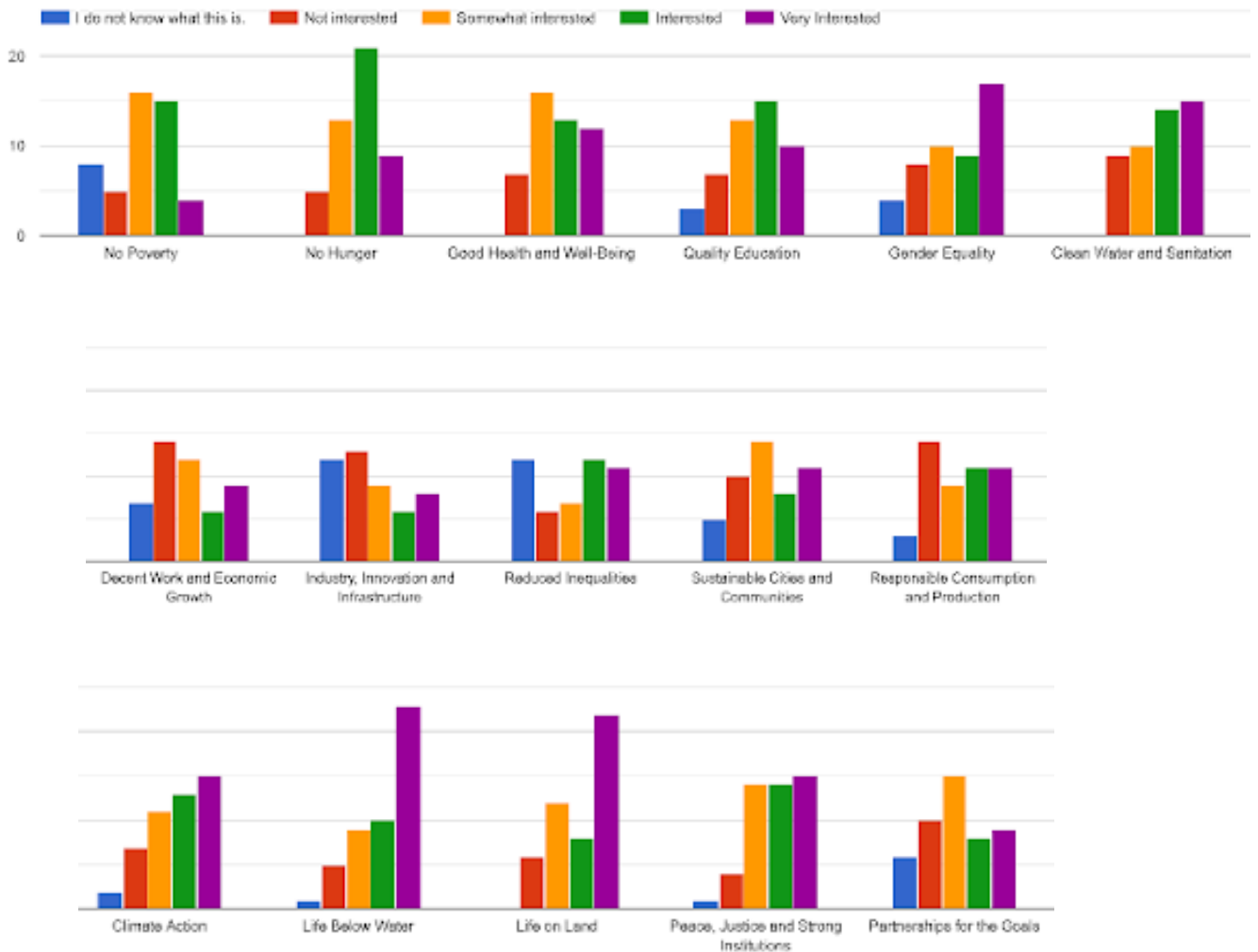


I've noted the SDG bins containing many books, such as the Goal 14 "Life Under Water" bin, and those with fewer or no books. For instance, my Goal 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth" bin is relatively empty. I have been including books about natural resources and financial literacy, but I have books about this on my radar. This has prompted me to conduct some of my research on these goals. What information should I be more aware of?

### **Which goals should we focus on?**

This got me thinking about which goals students might need to learn about, and which ones they are most or least interested in. So, I decided to ask them. As part of my end-of-year user survey, I included a section about the SDGs in a Google form. The students completed the survey, and below are the summarized answers I received. It's worth noting that K-3 classes answered as a group, while Grades 4-8 answered individually.

Mme Aston is interested in discovering what Sustainable Development Goals we are most interested in. Please click on the following:



According to the data provided, students are most interested in learning about topics such as Life Below Water, Life on Land, Gender Equality, Climate Action, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, Clean Water, Good Health and Well-Being, and Zero Hunger. However, they have less knowledge about topics such as Reduced Inequalities, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, Decent Work and Economic Growth, No Poverty, and Partnerships for the Goals. There are potential connections between these topics that could be explored through Social Studies inquiries. As a next step, I would like to dig into this data more deeply, separating it by K-3, Grades 4-6 and Grade 7 & 8. This would inform some next steps and focus.

When working with a group of Grade 7 and 8 student this year, I had groups of three identify what SDGs they felt were most important to work on in our local community;

they identified Goal 1 “No Poverty”, Goal 3 “Good Health and Well Being” and Goal 5 “Gender Equality”. When asked to talk about their reasoning, they are concerned about homelessness and had statistics to support the issue in London and in general. After this, a detailed inquiry ensued and concluded with a pitch to local community leaders about sustainable cities.

In a paper titled *Libraries and the UN Sustainable Development Goals* (Cyr & Connaway, 2020), librarians were surveyed. They were asked to list the top 5 SDGs they felt libraries could have the greatest impact on. The study revealed that the following SDGs could be best served in a library:



Figure 2: Cyr & Connaway, 2020, p.9

Do our students and the librarians agree? Somewhat.

In my survey, another topic that I asked students about was how I could motivate them to read more books in these bins. They had some really fantastic ideas which I have summarized:

- Organize Books on our digital library SORA by the goals (I have no control over this, but I could make the suggestion).
- Keep showcasing the goals in the daily announcements.
- Give stickers related to the goals when students read a book from the bins.

- Have students do book talks about the books.
- Create a passport or tracker.
- Create a school goal... if we read this # of SDG books, we get this school prize (extra recess, movie?) something fun.
- A separate fiction area of the books and the SDGs.
- Make the books visible in the LLC and not “tucked away.”
- Bigger regular prizes (monthly or weekly)!
- Projects based on these.
- Attach the SDGs to weekly themes.
- I am already motivated to read them.

In addition, I asked them what clubs or actions we could take in support of the Sustainable Development Goals. Here are their ideas:

- Eco-Club for all grades, mix older and younger students.
- An SDG Club with a different focus each month (Sustainable Development Club)
- Robotics Club
- Science Club
- Book Club
- Local Problems Club
- Newspaper Club
- Model UN
- Student Council
- We Club

### **How can we track our actions as a school community?**

Think of the impact tracking and celebrating a school's actions on the SDGs would make. Here are a few ideas for the school year. I am wondering how we could track these each year. Perhaps on our school's Virtual Library Learning Commons (VLLC) website? It would be interesting to note where we are taking more or less action. It would have to consider that some actions might target more than one goal at a time, as is often the case.

This year, a teacher-librarian colleague and I used an Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) supported professional learning day to work on how the SDGs could be integrated into significant events throughout the year. We also created an SDG



school action tracker. You can find the significant events [here](#) and the tracker [here](#). Please feel free to make a copy and edit it for your use.

What if the Library Learning Commons tracked and posted these actions? What impact would that have on the school culture?

### **Are my bins diverse?**

Recently, I was challenged to conduct a diversity audit on a part of my library learning commons, so I chose SDG bin #5 about “Gender Equality”. Here are some sample titles, authors, illustrators and book supporters. We need to make sure these bins are full of voices that have been marginalized for too long.





## **Some Inspiration:**

And in case you needed more reasons to get on board, here are some final thoughts from some K-8 students. My last survey question was this:

Is it important to learn about the Sustainable Development Goals? Tell me why:

- Cities around the world have problems that need to be solved.
- We feel it is very important to learn about sustainable development goals because we care about the earth. Though we are young, we feel we should have the same opportunities that our parents have received growing up and in life. We are committed to learning more and we want to be stewards of sustainable development goals as we mature into adulthood. We understand that knowledge is power and the more information we receive, the better informed we will be and thus we can influence others.
- I need to learn about what to use or not use in everyday life.
- We are not different, nor are we good for the environment.
- Learning about the SDGs is learning life skills.
- It will help us in the future.
- We will live better.
- So that we can make it happen.
- Without them, the world might crash!
- Because if we don't do anything about them more people will suffer.
- So that we can learn how to solve them.
- They teach us about the world and what we can do to help it.
- Because climate change is here.
- Perhaps learning about them will teach us to be more grateful for what we have.
- So that we can make a difference and act on them.
- It is good to be aware of our world.
- We need to understand what is impacting Earth.
- I am wondering which goals are more important than others.
- So that we can make Earth a better place for ALL.
- Yes it is very important to learn about sustainable development goals, because in turn you are learning about real world problems our communities are facing today. You are also learning how to help and what is being done to help.
- Yes, because there are people who are less fortunate and don't have a voice because of oppression and also just in general people who are less fortunate often have a hard time getting help so learning about the sustainable development goals we can help them.

And I can't help but wonder. What would they have to say next year? How would it compare? What would those graphs look like? How can libraries everywhere share the impact we are making on the SDGs? Which goals did they read the most about?

### **Why should libraries everywhere take this on?**

I read a wonderful article "Achieving the UN SDGs - Is there a role for libraries?" (Willems, 2022), where three academic librarians were interviewed about this topic. Gerald R. Beasley from Cornell put it this way:

All libraries are exceptionally well networked, and can think and act globally in a way that many organizations and institutions find it hard to do. Libraries also offer great meeting points and great ways to bring ideas together from different disciplines to solve massive problems. But we also need to spend time thinking about how to manage the crises that we are moving towards. Like every other organization, libraries are going to be massively affected by the changes ahead, and it's no good having a strategy that doesn't address such important, critical issues – the SDGs can help to shape that strategy (Willems, 2022).

The Sustainable Development Goals list the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) on their website. IFLA's SDG contributions will be listed on the UN's webpage as Action 40318. IFLA has pledged that by 2030 "320,000 public libraries and more than a million parliamentary, national, university, science and research, school, and special libraries will ensure that information on the SDGs and the skills to use this information are available to everyone" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, 2016). This ambitious commitment underscores IFLA's dedication to promoting the SDGs and ensuring their accessibility to all.

While the progress reports section may not currently list anything, there is a valuable opportunity for all of us to contribute. A link is provided to submit items, encouraging our active participation in our shared goals.

Need advice or guidance? The IFLA's document *Libraries and the sustainable development goals: A storytelling manual* (International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), 2018), is a comprehensive resource that details how libraries support the SDGs across the board. It is filled with beautiful illustrations, practical advice, and inspiring stories demonstrating progress on the SDGs through a library lens. Moreover, they offer an open-sourced map to which we can all contribute, empowering us to make a difference. I know I plan on contributing to the future

## **The SDGs are Foundational:**

I will guide my next steps using the new *Foundations for School Library Learning Commons in Canada: A Framework for Success* (Canadian School Libraries, 2023).

## **Physical & Virtual LLC Spaces:**

“The educational role of the school library should be reflected in the design of its facilities. Both the physical and virtual learning commons spaces must be designed not only to present resources, but to facilitate collaborative and participatory learning, and to foster creativity. The library should also accommodate individuals, and be a safe space for all” (Canadian School Libraries, 2023, p. 9).

While I am focused on the physical space when it comes to the SDGs, what could I develop online? I have a school library website, what would a page dedicated to the SDGs look like?

## **Human Resources**

“Volunteers, including student volunteers, can be an important tool, but should not be used to replace paid library staff” (Canadian School Libraries, 2023, p. 11).

I am fortunate to be a Teacher-Librarian for just over two-thirds of the day. I depend on student and parent volunteers to help me with tasks like making displays, shelving books and selecting books for the SDG bins. Their help lets me focus on deeper partnerships in the Library Learning Commons. Partnerships that are centred on the Sustainable Development Goals.

## **LLC Management – Collection Management**

“The ways in which we interact with library resources are ultimately dependent on how well we manage the collection. Collection management includes collection organization, cataloguing, resource circulation, and access to virtual resources. The ultimate goal of collection management is to foster independent exploration of resources through consistent organization” (Canadian School Libraries, 2023, p. 13).

I need to consider student feedback to manage the SDG collection well and make it accessible to increase circulation.

## **A Culture of Growth**

“In keeping with the responsive nature of the library learning commons (LLC), there is no end to the continuum as it evolves to keep pace with information and technology changes and school needs of the future” (Canadian School Libraries, 2023, p. 14).

This last text captures my thoughts on the essential connection between the SLLC and the Sustainable Development Goals best. These objectives are focused on the future and will enable us to expand our perspectives beyond our school to encompass the needs of our local community, our nation, and other parts of the world grappling with complex issues and seeking innovative solutions. The library learning commons should be at the heart of this endeavor, serving as a hub for not only learning, but also for initiating inspired actions. It is imperative that we maintain a sense of hope amidst all the negative news. Let's empower our students to take initiative and ensure that learning is infused with joy and hope. And most of all, let us go into 2030 knowing we have done our best to make a difference.

## **So How's it Going So Far?**

It turns out beautiful stickers (decals) are highly motivating. In our first month, students at my school read over 150 books related to the SDGs. I have them filling out slips and making connections between what they have read and what the SDG is about. Then they get to pick a sticker from some of my baskets (cute stickers, logos, and quotes). I plan to change the colour of the slips each month so that I can visually see books that are being read more often or least often and replace them with something else. I have involved students in helping me curate the bins. A couple of French Immersion colleagues and I are creating an SDG book list that I hope to share widely this year. I am also tracking what SDGs my students are reading about the most. Right now, SDG #16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions seems to be on their minds. And well, I will have more to say and share about that and more next year.

To be continued...

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