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Green is the Color of Back-to-School

I always enjoy the first day after Labour Day. As a student, I looked forward to going back to school (yes, it's true!) and as a parent, I enjoy seeing my daughter head back to school, and thankfully she does too. It is a time of new beginnings and of changing for the better. And since it is that time of year again - here are some of my thoughts on going back to school with a renewed commitment to green!

First, I would like to commend the NB Lung Association and Department of Education for being the first province in Canada to implement a no-idling policy for school buses. They worked together to introduce the policy in September 2005, which covers about 1,200 school buses around the province.

There are many environmental as well health and economic of not idling. Environmental benefits include fewer greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and other pollutants. Health-wise, our children are exposed to fewer pollutants that can contribute to asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, and various forms of heart disease. And there is an obvious economic benefit – less fuel burned.

Environment Canada states that Canada's transportation sector produces a quarter of all GHGs, a major contributor to climate change. In fact, reducing vehicle emissions could be the most important move Canadians make in reducing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

So now that you know the school buses aren't idling, isn't it time to make a commitment that you won't idle either, as you drop off and pick up your kids from school and activities?

Another great way to reduce our collective environmental impact is to pack litterless lunches – for both school and work. A number of families are doing this now by making sure that none of the food and packaging in their lunchbox end up in the garbage can at school. Perhaps classes could challenge each other for the least amount of generated waste from lunches? Reusable containers are inexpensive and certainly help cut down on the amount of packaging used for lunches (e.g. plastic wrap and baggies).

And yet another green action we can take for back-to-school is to focus on environmentally friendly school supplies. Parents and teachers spend millions of dollars of every August and throughout the school year on binders, paper, pens and pencils. That is a lot of purchasing power. Perhaps we can collectively start a campaign to encourage stores to provide more environmentally friendly supplies, like placing more emphasis on recycled paper and binders. And school districts that do bulk purchasing of school supplies for their schools have significant purchasing power to influence suppliers to provide the most environmentally friendly options.

We should be proud that the first province-wide no-idling policy for school buses in Canada started in New Brunswick. Perhaps we can also become the first province in Canada to work with school districts and stores to implement green purchasing policies for back to school supplies? What a feather in our cap that would be!

And don't forget, one of the most important environmental decisions we can make when it comes to our buying habits, is to make do with less! This means use both sides of the paper, reuse left-over supplies from last year, and tune our kids in to not expecting that they need to have everything brand new at the start of each school year. Yes, as a parent I understand that changing our children's expectations for environmental reasons is long-term journey – but there is no doubt in my mind that it is a worthy one!

Peter Corbyn is co-founder of GreenNexus; Special Advisor to The Climate Project – Canada; and a parent of a little girl who loves going back to school! What would you like the Green Matters writers to explore? Email us at greenmatters@fredericton.ca.