



# DESIGNING PLAYFUL CLIMATE READY SCHOOL GROUNDS

**LOOKBOOK BRIEF**

A photograph of three children playing on a rope climbing structure outdoors. A boy in a green jacket is climbing a rope, while a girl in a purple jacket is reaching up. Another child is partially visible in the background. The structure is made of wooden posts and thick ropes. The background shows a school building and a clear blue sky.

## Why Climate-Ready School Grounds Matter

School grounds shape how children play, learn, and connect with nature and each other every day. As climate impacts intensify, these significant public land holdings present a powerful opportunity to redesign school grounds as vibrant, resilient landscapes that benefit children, communities, and the climate.

**Climate-ready** school grounds use natural and built features—guided by **Green Infrastructure** principles—to cool sites with shade, manage stormwater, and restore biodiversity. Increasingly, school boards recognize that these redesigned spaces can also strengthen student development, well-being, physical and mental health, learning, and social behaviour.

Climate-ready school grounds integrate the following key design elements with child-centered play and learning spaces:



## Vegetated Landscapes

As native trees, shrubs, and perennials mature, their benefits multiply, providing shade, stormwater absorption, erosion control, improved air quality, and reduced energy use for cooling and heating while supporting biodiversity and creating comfortable outdoor spaces for learning and play.



## Topography & Landforms

By shaping land to both shed and absorb water through features like swales, berms, and gentle depressions, school grounds can slow and filter runoff, prevent erosion and flooding, and create greener, richer and quieter learning environments that improve biodiversity, and climate resilience.



## Permeable Surfaces

Permeable surfaces such as mulch, gravel, and pavers let rainwater soak into the ground rather than run off, reducing flooding and replenishing groundwater while giving students a hands-on understanding of the water cycle and how green infrastructure supports climate-ready communities.





## Sustainable Materials

Sustainable design choices, such as thoughtful material selection and construction strategies that prioritize repair, reuse, and local sourcing, reduce environmental impact and extend the life of school ground features. Designing elements that are easy to fix or refresh also creates opportunities for staff and students to participate in supervised learning projects that put sustainability into practice.



## Diverse Play & Learning Spaces

Climate-ready designs help children build confidence, creativity, physical skills, and environmental awareness through designs that balance:

- Ecological spaces (gardens, pollinator habitats, native plantings)
- Active spaces (climbing, balancing, navigating natural elements)
- Individual spaces (quiet nooks, shady seating)
- Gathering spaces (outdoor classrooms, group circles)
- Experimental spaces (sand play, loose parts, water flow exploration)

## CASE STUDY

### **Irma Coulson Public School,** Canada's first climate-ready school

The Climate Ready Schools Pilot project at the kindergarten to Grade 8 school with 1,000-plus students in Milton, Ontario was initiated and coordinated by Evergreen in partnership with the Halton District School Board. The work to transform the school ground into a vibrant and diverse green space for outdoor learning began in the spring of 2020 and was completed in the fall of 2022.

The design prioritized a diversity of play and learning space along with climate-resiliency features:

- Rain gardens, swales, and permeable pathways that soak up and filter stormwater.
- Tree groves and vegetated berms that cool the site and add habitat.
- Playful landscapes that encourage climbing, exploring, balancing, and imaginative play.
- Outdoor classrooms and flexible spaces that support learning across subjects.



### **What This Means for Educators**

Healthier, cooler and more comfortable grounds offer educators outdoor learning environments in which they can engage students in curriculum connections across science, geography, math, arts and well-being. Educators enjoy adaptable teaching spaces to deepen environmental literacy while students can move, learn, collaborate, and connect with nature every day.

## Big Picture Impacts

The redesigned school ground triples canopy cover, reduces impermeable surfaces by over 70%, and meets or exceeds accessibility and CSA playground standards—creating a cooler, more inclusive landscape that remains usable after storms, strengthens community connection, and delivers measurable returns on investment and long-term stewardship, with an estimated \$2.19 social, environmental, and financial return for every dollar invested.

## Moving Forward Together

With unparalleled experience, Evergreen has been working with teachers, school staff, students, school boards and communities across Canada since 1991, to create greener, healthier, and more resilient school grounds. Climate Ready Schools builds on this experience to raise the standard for Canadian school grounds. Climate-ready school grounds are within reach and with public schools in almost every neighbourhood across the country, the POTENTIAL to positively impact every community is significant. We're committed to bringing Climate Ready Schools to scale—let's work together to make it happen and build on the success to date:

1.3M students, teachers, and school staff impacted, 6,000+ schoolground greening projects completed, Professional Development for 50,000+ educators, 2,500+ grants awarded investing over \$3,500,000.



This brief summarizes key insights from [Designing Playful Climate-Ready School Grounds: A Lookbook](#), and highlights what educators and families need to know.

For more on Climate Ready Schools visit the Evergreen Resource Hub:  
**[evergreen.ca](https://evergreen.ca)**

