

**Top Tips  
for Schools**

# Contents

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- 2 **Why should schools go plastic free?**
- 3 **Considerations before your campaign**
- 4 **Alternatives to single-use products**
- 6 **Water Bottles as Part of the School Meals Scheme**
- 7 **Case study**
- 8 **The Green-Schools 7 Step Programme**
- 9 **Plastic Free Action Plan Example**
- 10 **Plastic Free Action Plan Form**

More and more schools are taking on the challenge to reduce or eliminate single-use plastics.

In this booklet, you will find information about how to set up a campaign in your school to go plastic free and reduce single-use.

**“Small acts,  
when multiplied  
can transform  
the world.”**

— Howard Zinn

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**This guide was designed with sustainability in mind** – The Let's Go Plastic Free guide was redesigned in 2025 in collaboration with [TheFACTORY.ie](https://www.thefactory.ie), Ireland's leading sustainable design and print studio.

Printed copies of this guide were printed on 100% carbon-balanced and recycled paper using eco-friendly inks. Both the design and printing processes were powered by The FACTORY's self-generated green energy.

# Why Should Schools Go Plastic Free?

There are over 900,000 full-time students in primary and secondary education across Ireland – almost 20% of Ireland's population.

There are over 950,000 full-time students in primary and secondary education across Ireland – almost 20% of Ireland's population. Schools are integral to communities and can be a powerful influencing force. If all schools adopted environmentally sustainable practices, and removed single-use plastics, this would have a massive impact on the volume of Ireland's plastic consumption and on our society. Schools play an important role in educating students about their impact on the planet and fostering a culture of conscientiousness and good environmental practices which can carry on into adulthood.



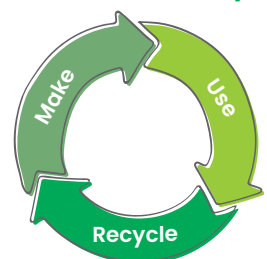
**Reduce and Reuse are always better than Recycle!** A need for more recycling is often highlighted as the key to becoming sustainable. However, recycling has high energy requirements and is not a perfect process. Much more critical is to reduce our total waste in the first place by using less, and by reusing products as much as possible. For example, using a disposable compostable coffee cup may seem to be a step in the right direction, but in the end, it still requires a lot of water, energy and other resources, to produce, it perpetuates a culture of single-use, and these products are rarely disposed of correctly. A **reusable** cup is a much more sustainable choice.

**It's not just about plastic...**, Plastic is everywhere – it is a cheap and versatile material. In certain settings, such as in medical equipment, for example, it can be extremely valuable. However, since the mid-20th century, plastic consumption has exploded. The resources that we use to produce all of our products are limited, and producing materials always has an environmental impact. For example, the mining of metals to produce drinks cans destroys natural habitats and uses up valuable resources, while large-scale production of compostable cups and cutlery requires land and water resources to grow the original plant material, and also, if compostable items end up in the general waste bin or recycling bin by accident, they aren't going anywhere! These products need to go into an aerobic compost system in order to break down correctly. The take-home message is that while of course, we will always have an impact on the natural world, we can greatly reduce this impact by producing less waste, in any form, and by being part of the **circular economy**. The circular economy means that any products used are reused and regenerated in a closed loop cycle, rather than used products being discarded. Say no to single-use and give possessions a value again!

## Linear Economy



## Circular Economy



# Considerations Before Your Campaign

**Plan** – Decide what your aim is, the actions you need to take to achieve this and a realistic time frame. Set regular quantifiable targets so you can measure your success and maintain motivation.

**Awareness** – Raise awareness about the campaign and involve as many people as possible in making it happen – make sure people know why the school is cutting out plastic, the negative effects of plastic for the environment and health, the benefits of reducing our consumption both for ourselves as individuals and for the global community and ways that individuals can cut down their own plastic consumption. Why not collect all the plastic bottles used in a week and create a display, so students and staff can see the level of waste produced?

**Staff Room** – Children and young people are often easy to persuade towards sustainable practices and feel passionately about environmental issues. It can be more challenging to change the behaviours of adults, who have long-established habits and preferences. Teaching staff may also be under pressure due to workload, managing extra-curricular programmes and other priorities and interests. However, it is very important that staff act as role-models and support any environmental campaign in the school. A positive, rewarding attitude is more likely to see positive results and support than forcing a new system on unwilling staff who may see it as an addition to their workload or an inconvenience.

**Time** – Like any change, going plastic free will inevitably have some teething issues and possible set-backs. Don't expect complete success overnight but set a realistic time-frame with mini-targets to achieve along the way.

**Infrastructure** – Consider what changes may be necessary to the school's infrastructure to facilitate a move to plastic free. For example, are there water fountains or drinking-water taps available for bottle refills?

**Cost** – There may be an initial cost involved in becoming plastic free, but the investment soon pays off. Look into possible grants or funding options to install water fountains in your school, or to design reusable bottles with the school logo. Organise a fundraiser such as a cake sale or no-uniform day.



# Alternatives to Single-use Products

**Plastic Bottles** – Ditch single-use and get a reusable bottle instead, do your own research into what type is best for you: we recommend stainless steel or aluminium rather than hard plastic. Stainless steel is durable and keeps drinks deliciously cool, but aluminium is lighter to carry and cheaper to buy. Are there accessible taps or water fountains in the school where students can refill? Encourage parents to swap out juices in plastic bottles or cartons with straws, and to use dilutable squash instead. Some people will use the same single-use bottle over and over again, but from a health perspective this is not recommended as plastic degrades and can release harmful chemicals into drinking water.



**Straws** – Since April 2019 schools are prohibited by law from buying single-use plastics such as straws. Students can be encouraged again to avoid straws by using a reusable bottle rather than bringing a new juice carton every day. Metal, bamboo and paper straws are now widely available as an alternative to plastic straws.



**Food Packaging**– This may be the most difficult single-use plastic to control as many food products come pre-packaged, and it very much depends on what parents provide in children's lunchboxes. A point to highlight is that a healthy lunch, such as a sandwich and piece of fruit, can be provided without any need for plastic packaging. Many items that come pre-packaged are highly processed with a high salt or sugar content. Yogurts in recyclable pots are preferable to soft plastic tubes which must go in the general waste – or go one better and refill a reusable pot from a large container of yogurt. Sending nonrecyclable packaging waste home may encourage parents to reduce the amount of packaging they put in lunchboxes. If lunches are provided by a local shop or in-school caterer, speak to them about using less packaging, or switching to reusable cutlery and delph instead of plastic. Some smaller businesses may be reluctant at first to facilitate a move to plastic free/reducing single-use. They may be daunted by the prospect of changing their established systems and processes, concerned about costs or hygiene protocols. Support them with this transition by researching alternatives, long-term savings and highlighting the student body's concern for the environment.



# Alternatives to Single-use Products

**Cling Film** – Cling film is a type of soft plastic that can contribute to your school's plastic waste problem. . Alternatives to cling-film include beeswax wrap covers which can be rinsed and re-used. We do not recommend tin-foil as an alternative as this creates more waste. Good quality reusable lunch boxes can be purchased in a variety of shapes and sizes, which also reduces the need for cling-film.



**Resources**– Be conscious of the resources you are using in class, more and more unsustainable products such as plastic "twist" crayons are showing up on school booklists, creating unnecessary plastic waste. Choose good old-fashioned colouring pencils or crayons instead.



**Glitter** – Glitter is often overlooked as a source of plastic pollution, but these tiny fragments of plastic end up washed down our sinks and make their way into our oceans, where they are consumed by fish and marine invertebrates and have a major detrimental impact on ocean food-chains. Biodegradable glitter made from plant cellulose is available but be aware that this is not always completely plastic-free.



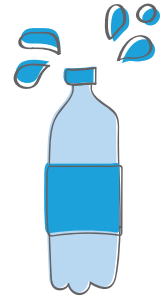
**Balloons** – A major offender in terms of plastic litter is balloons. Every balloon that is released, whether intentionally at a graduation ceremony or other celebration, or accidentally, ends up as litter on land, or more often in our oceans. Both the plastic of the balloon and the cord or ribbon it is tied to are hazardous to wildlife causing entanglement, choking and death from ingestion. Please do not release balloons at school events! There are many alternatives to mark a special occasion – including blowing bubbles, flying kites, planting a tree or decorating with bunting, flags or streamers.



**Wrapping Books** – Many parents wrap school-books in plastic wrap to protect them throughout the year. Can you encourage the use of wrapping paper instead or even the re-use of plastic wrap? Remember though that glittery, metallic or laminated papers have a blended plastic component and so cannot be recycled.



# Water Bottles as Part of the School Meals Scheme



Reducing plastic waste can be particularly daunting for DEIS schools or schools who receive pre-packed lunches and water bottles as part of the School Meals Scheme, however it is becoming increasingly normalized for schools to install water filters as an alternative to single-use bottles. The best course of action very much depends on the requirements

and limitations of the individual school. For example, if there are drinking water taps in each classroom, perhaps you only need to supply a reusable bottle and cancel the single-use bottle supply. Larger schools or secondary schools may be better served by installing drinking fountains or a water filtration system.

**Talking to Your Catering Provider** – Many school-lunch providers are happy to facilitate a switch to reusable bottles, and some larger caterers are now working in partnership with water filtration companies to supply filtration systems or dispensers for schools. Contact your supplier to discuss options with them. If there is a lot of packaging waste with your school lunches, speak to your catering provider about the possibility of reducing this, or finding sustainable alternatives.

**Talking to Your Board of Management** – Approach your Board of Management well-informed and with a clearly mapped out proposal. Calculate the long-term savings and environmental impact of switching away from single-use plastics and use this to make your case to the Board of Management. The Board of Management may be able to fund all, or part, of the costs incurred, with the remainder raised through grants or community fundraising events.

## Grants

Many local authorities offer a **Circular Economy or Local Waste Prevention Grant** which you could apply for to subsidise the cost involved in installing water fountains. The amount of funding available varies between local authorities, get in touch with your local authority to see if they have a grant available and what the requirements are – the school may be able to apply itself, or the Environment Awareness Officer in the local authority may have to make the

submission on the school's behalf. Deadlines are generally early in the calendar year.

Local authorities may also offer grants under the **Community Climate Action Fund** to support collaborative sustainability projects between local authorities and schools or community groups. Other national or local grant schemes may be available, which you may be able to apply for with the support of community groups such as Tidy Towns.



# Case Study

In 2018, Newpark Comprehensive School in Blackrock, Co. Dublin became the first school in Ireland to go plastic free.



They have attributed a lot of their success to initiating a campaign that was primarily student-led by a core team of passionate transition years. The students investigated alternatives to single-use plastic and liaised with the board of management about the campaign and with their catering provider, to ban all single-use plastics from their school canteen. They also contacted local shops in the area to ask for their support.

They sourced and designed their own "Plastic Outta the Park" stainless steel bottles which were added to the book-list as a mandatory piece of kit for incoming first years. They also received huge media attention by getting in touch with local radio and tv stations and by holding a large campaign launch to which they invited members of environmental NGOs, local politicians and council members.

## Some More Notes...

**Petitioning** – Petitioning is an important part of the fight to reduce single-use plastics. Write to your TDs, MEPs, and local councilors to support campaigns against single-use, and to hold politicians accountable for taking action on these issues for society in general.

**Awareness** – Young people are powerful advocates for change. Between 2018 and 2023, the "Fridays for Future" campaign, led by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, saw young people all over the world carry out school strikes in protest of governments' inaction on climate change, with over 14 million people taking to the streets since the campaign began. On a local level, there are students all over the country taking action within their school and community to tackle issues such as climate change, pollution and inequalities. An Taisce coordinates several "Ambassador Programmes" for secondary school students through the Green-Schools and Climate Action Programmes. Students can get involved in these programmes to learn more about sustainability and gain skills in advocacy and raising awareness. Younger children can also be role models in their school and to their parents and wider community, by being part of their Green-Schools Committee, and doing their bit to help keep their school litter-free, turn off lights, taps etc.

**Eco-anxiety** – We are seeing increasing instances of anxiety and depression both in young people and adults, in relation to our current ecological crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution. There is no denying that these are grave, large-scale issues which can be overwhelming. It's important to remember, that while it's critical that we all do our part, any one person is not responsible for a global problem, nor are they tasked with solving it on their own. In other words, it's important to recognize that we each need to take responsibility for our actions and behaviours but also acknowledge that there are very few aspects of life over which we have absolute certainty or control. Working together to make more sustainable choices, and collectively putting pressure on big businesses and government are actions we can all take to help our environment. Positive news stories should be shared, and successes celebrated, to counteract feelings of powerlessness. It can also be helpful to have group discussions and acknowledge these feelings and concerns and share support to develop resilience to set-backs or uncertainties. Rather than always focusing on the problems, encourage positive experiences in nature, such as a woodland or seaside walk, going bird-watching, growing your own veg patch or otherwise getting out and about.





# The Green-Schools 7 STEP PROGRAMME

Follow the Green-Schools 7 Steps to guide you through your campaign and action plan template.



**1 Green-Schools Committee** – Do you have a strong team in place who will lead the campaign?



**2 Environmental Review** – Carry out a bin survey and quantify the plastic produced in your school over a week. This will help you set a target. Distribute surveys to students, staff and parents about their knowledge and behaviours regarding single-use plastics.

**4 Monitoring & Evaluation** – Assess your progress regularly, are you on track? If you aren't meeting your targets is there something you can do differently? Perhaps you need to adjust your goals slightly if they were overambitious to begin.



**3 Action Plan** – Use the template provided to set up your Action Plan – set S.M.A.R.T. targets: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely.



**Note:** Every journey is different. Steps do not have to be taken in order.

**5 Curriculum Work** – Tie in your campaign to classwork e.g. art, science, geography, history, SPHE.



**7 Green Code** – Come up with a slogan for your campaign, create posters with the slogan, or why not design reusable e.g. bottles with your chosen slogan and school crest!



**6 Informing & Involving** – Involve the whole school body through a campaign action day, competitions, quizzes, announcements and fun activities. Involve the wider community by working with local groups and businesses and keeping parents informed of the campaign.



**Top Tip** – Additional resources, including posters and PowerPoint presentations, are available at: [www.greenschoolsireland.org/resources](http://www.greenschoolsireland.org/resources)

# Plastic Free Action Plan Example

**Remember:** Choose a goal that is S.M.A.R.T.: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely.

**School Name:**

Example National School

**Green-Schools Coordinator:**

Ms McExample

**Goal:** Example N.S. aim to reduce plastic bottles by 75% between 1st September and 26th June. Our motivation for undertaking this campaign is the shocking statistic that there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish by 2050.

## Trouble-shooting:

Possible obstacles or setbacks	Solutions, alternatives and actions
Parents habitually provide children with plasticbottled drinks for lunch.	We will write to parents to inform them of our aim and our concerns for the environment We will offer an alternative by installing drinking water fountains in school. We will fundraise for branded reusable school bottles to be added to the school booklist. We will highlight the negative impact of processed sugary drinks for children's health.

## Action Plan:

Action steps to take	Person/group responsible	Timeframe	Progress made
Speak to principal and staff about our campaign.	Ms McExample.	By 10th September.	Had meeting with principal on 6th, she agreed to support campaign. Provided information session to staff at lunchtime 7th.
Create posters to inform school.	Sarah and Eoin from the Green-Schools Committee.	By 15th September.	Completed and displayed 13th September.





**Green-Schools**  
Tel: 01 400 2222  
Email: [info@greenschoolsireland.org](mailto:info@greenschoolsireland.org)  
[www.greenschoolsireland.org](http://www.greenschoolsireland.org)



**An Taisce**  
*The National Trust for Ireland*

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