

## Green-Schools

### *16 years of providing Active Environmental Education!*

*The biggest topic in the news for the last few decades, besides Ireland's financial situation, is Climate Change. The media is making sure that we are all well aware of the ins and outs of our financial crisis, but as regards our environment there is still a lot of confusion out there. The challenge for teachers is to navigate through a broad range of information and above all select practical ways of disseminating it to their pupils in the classroom.*

For the last 16 years the Environmental Education Unit of An Taisce, in partnership with all Local Authorities, has been rolling out the Green-Schools Programme to provide teachers at all levels with practical tools that can help them with environmental education. The Programme is supported by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the National Transport Authority and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The programme is sponsored by Repak, The Wrigley Company and HSBC Ireland.



Green-Schools, known internationally as Eco-Schools, is an environmental education programme, environmental management system and award scheme that promotes and acknowledges long-term, whole school action for the environment. Unlike a once-off project, it is a long-term programme that introduces participants (students, teachers, parents and the wider community) to the concept of an environmental management system. However, Green-Schools is far more than just that.

With the emphasis placed on a democratic and participatory approach, the programme aims to raise students' awareness of sustainable development issues through classroom study as well as school and community action. It encourages children to take an active role in how their school can be run for the benefit of the environment, highlighting the importance of civic values. Students and staff can work together to help run the school in an environmentally conscious way. Students can apply their newly gained environmental knowledge to everyday situations in school and at home, thus allowing them to see the relevance of classroom learning and experience active citizenship.

In Ireland over 3,650 primary, secondary and special schools (87% of all Irish schools) are currently participating in the programme and 2308 schools have been awarded the Green Flag. The Irish Green-Schools programme is one of the most successful within the international network.

### How does it work?

The Green-Schools Methodology encompasses Seven Steps that any school can adopt. The process involves a wide range of stakeholders, but pupils play the central role. When a school decides to take part in the Green-Schools programme it fits the seven steps around its circumstances and situation and starts implementing them. A *Green-Schools committee* is set up which represents the whole-school and is as student led as possible. This committee directs the operations of the school's Green-Schools programme, initiating school actions and recording updates. To keep track of progress they create and maintain an *Action Plan*. However, before any actions can be executed they have to identify the school's current environmental impact through an *Environmental Review*. The Action Plan's purpose is then to break down the overall goals/targets (identified in the review) into bite-size pieces. Actions to *monitor and evaluate* progress are also incorporated in the plan. Many tasks can be incorporated within the *curriculum* so that not all the work falls back on the committee. Along with other activities, a *Green Code* is composed to help *inform and involve* the whole school and wider community.

Once these seven steps have been successfully implemented for more than one school year the school is awarded the Green Flag, an internationally acknowledged symbol for environmental excellence. Whereas there is flexibility as to the ceremony and awarding process, the criteria for assessing schools for the award is faithful to the guidelines of the International Programme. One of the key success factors of the Green-Schools programme in Ireland is that it is a themed programme. That is, schools undertaking the programme work through the seven steps one theme at a time. The themes in sequence are:

1. Litter & Waste
2. Energy
3. Water
4. Travel
5. Biodiversity



Therefore, for a school to add the energy theme they must have completed the seven steps for litter & waste and achieved their Green-Flag. Every two years a school then adds a new theme, while maintaining the previous themes. The use of themes helps prevent schools from trying to deal with every aspect of their environment at once which could be overwhelming. Furthermore, it allows schools to build on their experience, expertise and best practice as they work from theme to theme. As schools work from theme to theme they will realise that there is quite a bit of overlap between the themes (e.g. recycling waste is great way of using less energy and water to produce new products).

### How to make it work!

Schools that have tried to adjust to the seven steps often find it more and more difficult to continue with each added theme. The seven steps should therefore be attuned to fit the type of school. Although extracurricular work will always be involved for the committee, the workload shouldn't be such that it burns out its members. Integrating the steps into classroom lectures and the curriculum as much as possible helps to spread this workload, increases the chances for continuation of the programme and thus allows Green-Schools to become part of the school ethos.

A committee is set up every year, often using previous members who can familiarise the new members. Pre-schools use the whole class as their committee, where primary schools might meet once a month with one or more representatives from each class, either during lunch or using the SPHE hour. Secondary schools include TY groups and representatives of each (non-exam) year or each class. However, it is up to each school to decide how their committee operates. Some schools undertaking the programme have found that they need to meet more regularly at the beginning, until their programme becomes established, where others meet regularly, but more often when events need to be organized. In the end the most important job of the committee is to initiate school actions and keep records of these actions using the other six steps.

Using measurements, surveys and or mapping a school identifies its current environmental impact and highlights the good, the bad and the ugly. Typically, schools will firstly quantify their impacts for the theme they are working on (e.g. measuring the amount of waste they are producing and sending to landfill/recycling, the amount of litter black spots in and around the school, the amount of electricity they use, the amount of water use, the amount of traffic to school per type and how much biodiversity exists etc.) In general, a school will then qualify this information by working out how these amounts are being generated and where. However, schools may also undertake a review that includes the wider community (e.g. examine recycling levels at home; examine community attitudes to climate change etc.). These surveys are usually initiated by the committee, but not necessarily executed by them. Since the programme is a whole school initiative the curriculum is often used to include everybody in

the process. History for instance is a great subject in which a class can find out about how previous generations used their resources by interviewing grandparents. Creating a map of the school and highlighting litter black spots, energy sources or water points would fit perfectly in a geography class and calculating how much water is used washing your hands or calculating the average speed of traffic passing the school makes mathematics much more tangible.

Producing an Action Plan or a “To do list” is the next step, even though the review is the first action that is put in it. The purpose of this action plan is to break down the overall goals/targets (identified in the review) into bite-size pieces. It should include:

- the necessary tasks,
- the people(s) responsible,
- and time frame for actions in order to achieve your goals/targets.

Using these three points as columns in a table format is essential to help visualize the progress made. It is the Green-Schools committees’ management tool. Some schools design different plans for different aspects of their programme (e.g. one for promoting awareness, one for litter, and one for prevention/minimisation of waste). These aspects are then specified in goals/targets, e.g. 30% reduction in waste to landfill in 4 months, 20% reduction in average energy consumption over 12 month period through low-cost and no-cost actions, etc. As they bring the action plan into each meeting committee members can check if goals/targets have been met, actions have been carried out or if additional actions need to be taken.

### Informing and Involving.....

Direct curriculum links at primary school level, which are apparent within the Environmental Care & Awareness Strand of Social, Environmental & Scientific Education (SESE) are being used for this. At secondary level the direct link is with Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). However many schools also use other subject areas through innovative teaching. Green-Schools programme updates are communicated through school notice boards, school assemblies, school newsletters, websites, letters to businesses and corporations, local and national press, radio and television. The Green-Schools Notice Boards prove to be an excellent way of informing and involving the wider school body, and local community.

Language classes are the obvious subjects to be used for this, but Arts, music and drama also provide great possibilities for sharing information with the greater school community. Ever since schools were established art and musical instruments have been made from recyclable materials. Now wind turbines are modelled to show renewable energy, plastic cups & popsicle sticks are turned into water wheels, cars made out of milk cartons & bottle tops are racing through classrooms and timber is recycled to create brand new nesting boxes. Every year an Action Day is organised that can involve school plays, talent & fashion shows, open days and St.

Patrick Day parades. All are based on environmental (theme related) issues and with costumes & props made from recyclables. These action days are a perfect opportunity for students, staff and the wider community to get together to work towards achieving some of the targets set out in the action plan. In many cases they are carried out in conjunction with local or national projects (e.g. National Spring Clean, Tidy Town events, Walk to School week, Bike week, World Water Day, Energy Awareness Week, Clean Coast, Tree Week, etc.). Some schools will have an Open Day, inviting the local public to attend, and offering advice on environmental management.



Finally a Green-Code needs to be composed and although it is stated as being step seven this can also be created as one of the first actions, since a catchy slogan; poem or song can help round up the troops and get the whole school behind the current theme. It is a statement of the objectives demonstrating the school’s commitment to environmentally friendly actions. Often the whole school is involved through a competition to select or compile a slogan, acrostic poem or even rap/song. This way pupils feel they have had involvement in developing their code and will more likely adhere by it. The Green

Code can also offer the opportunity for discussions during personal and social education classes. When visiting schools it is often a highlight for each class to recite or sing their Green-Code, it is usually displayed all around the school and is even released to the local press and the general public on some occasions.

### Any help out there?

The first point of call for help implementing the Programme would be An Taisce's Environmental Education Unit Head Office, one of its local Education Officers or the Environmental Education Officer in your Local Authority. The Green-Schools website ([www.greenschoolsireland.org](http://www.greenschoolsireland.org)) is a great source of information and of course contact with other schools can be a great way of getting extra support.

However to create a more in depth form of assistance for teachers An Taisce's Environmental Education Unit has set up a course to supply them with background information and practical activities for the classroom. The course is run simultaneously in several locations across the country, within the Summer Course Programme of the Department of Education and Skills. This year 6 courses have been scheduled in; Donegal, Sligo, Galway, Cork, Kilkenny and Wexford. Since the Programme is a whole school effort these courses could be beneficial to all school staff.

The 5 day course uses the 5 themes of the Green-Schools Programme to give teachers a more in depth knowledge of Waste disposal, Energy supply, Water treatment, Transport issues and Biodiversity during the five day course. Guest speakers from the local authorities and other relevant organisations provide theoretical background information, while local site visits bring this information to life in a practical way.

At local recycle centres Environmental Awareness Officers explain on site what to do and not to do with your waste. Last year the group in Kilkenny visited 'The Watershed' a swimming pool that most schools in the area know from their swimming lessons. It turns out they use woodchips and solar panels to heat the water in the pool. Waste water treatment plants around the country have been paid a visit, opening people's eyes to what actually needs to be done to clean the water we use every day to protect our environment from disastrous pollution. Walking around the course venues shows the hazards and possibilities there are for sustainable transport and just going outside the classroom looking at a square meter of lawn proves how much biodiversity is out there and what we are doing to it. During group discussions classroom activities are being explored. For implementing the seven steps of the Green-Schools Programme a practical use of each subject in the curriculum can be found.

### Why does it work?



stimulating learning environments for our children.

Schools have reduced their environmental impacts in an amazing number of ways. Waste has been reduced through a combination of prevention, minimisation, reuse & recycling. Reduction of water and energy consumption has taken place through promotion of no-cost occupant behaviour and the investment of resulting savings into low to medium cost approaches. Promotion of alternative modes of transport has brought down car use and traffic congestion dramatically and school grounds are becoming heavens for wild life, creating

Through the democratic process involved in Green-Schools, pupils will take control of their own environment, learning and making decisions about how to improve both their home and their school environment. The result can be a more integrated community.