



Geep GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

Sharing ideas to create a more just and sustainable future through the power of environmental education

CASE STUDY

Eco-Schools Northern Ireland – Empowering Young People Through an Environmental Education Framework

Northern Ireland

CONTRIBUTOR

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GEEP is a partnership of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Environmental Protection Administration of Taiwan, and the North American Association for Environmental Education.



Eco-Schools Northern Ireland – Empowering Young People Through an Environmental Education Framework



Overview

This case study looks at the growth of the international Eco-Schools program in Northern Ireland as well as the challenges it faces in empowering our young people to be the drivers of behavior change for a sustainable world.

At a time when environmental education is urgently important, the Eco-Schools framework has been an excellent way to support schools in delivering EE, and also a great way to build a strong network of like-minded organizations working together to deliver common environmental goals.

This case study illustrates:

- How Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful launched the Eco-Schools program
- The success of Ambassador Schools in Northern Ireland
- The need for ongoing data monitoring and evaluation of programs



Background

The Eco-Schools program was developed in 1994 in response to the need for involving young people in finding solutions to environmental and sustainable development challenges at the local level, as identified at the UN (Rio) Conference on Environment and Development of 1992. The program was initiated by member organizations of the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), with the support of the European Commission. The program now runs in 67 countries worldwide and engages over 18 million students. Eco-Schools extends learning beyond the classroom and develops responsible attitudes and commitment, both at home and in the wider community. Its participatory approach and combination of learning and action make it an ideal way for schools to embark on a meaningful path to improving the environments of schools and their local communities. The program also positively influences the lives of young people, school staff, families, local authorities, NGOs, and all other bodies involved in this important area of work.

In Northern Ireland the Eco-Schools program is run by the environmental charity Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful. The charity provides training events for teachers throughout the year, including regional cluster group meetings hosted by the local councils and an annual Eco-Schools Teachers Conference. The Teachers Conference offers awards, workshops, and inspirational keynote speakers such as Judy Braus from NAAEE, who spoke at the 2017 conference (the day was captured in this thought provoking [video](#)). Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful also creates projects and campaigns to assist schools on their Eco-Schools award journey and provides teaching resources, monitoring methods, and links to key curriculum areas.

Northern Ireland was one of the first countries to participate in the program, launching with eight registered schools in the first year and becoming the first country to award a Green Flag to a local school. By 2007 there were 300 schools registered, which accounts for around 20 percent of all Northern Ireland schools. The program continued to build momentum over the next 10 years and reached the landmark achievement of 100 percent registration (currently 1,152 schools) in the program by 2015. Northern Ireland (NI) was the first country globally to reach this landmark and, as of 2017, 25 percent of all schools in NI are now Green Flag Eco-Schools and a total of 1000 Green Flags have been awarded.



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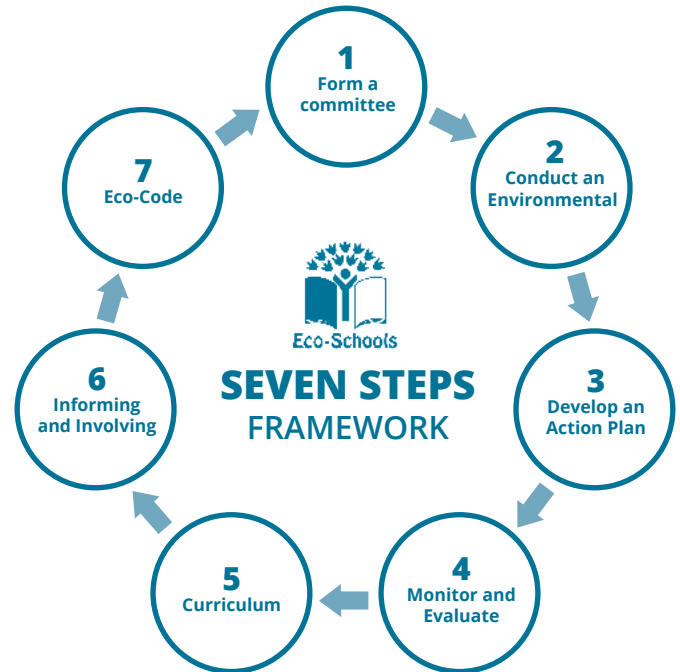


Approach

- **Eco-Schools is holistic.** It aims to make environmental awareness and action an intrinsic part of the life and ethos of a school. Led by pupils and including teachers, non-teaching staff and parents, as well as local government, the media and local businesses, Eco-Schools works to extend its influence beyond the school gates and to graciously disrupt the status quo of current environmental stewardship.
- **Eco-Schools is both a program and an award scheme.** It consists of three structural elements: The Seven Steps Framework, the Eco-Schools Themes, and Assessment for the Green Flag. Schools complete the Seven Steps, which is the international framework that guides them through environmental evaluation, monitoring, and improvement. Schools choose from three themes to focus on during their award journey: Litter, Energy, Water, Waste, Transport, Healthy Living, Outdoor Learning, Biodiversity, Global Perspective, and Climate Change. Schools can then achieve bronze and silver awards before being assessed for their internationally recognized Green Flag.
- **Eco-Schools is a long-term program.** The Green Flag requires renewal every two years which encourages continual review and improvement of the school's environmental performance and the pupils' understanding and engagement in fresh eco-themes. In recognition of schools that had achieved multiple renewals of their Green Flag, and were looking for additional challenges and inspiration, the Ambassador Eco-School status was created. This award is given to outstanding, best practice schools, with the hope that they will spread the Eco-Schools environmental message far and wide and mentor less experienced Eco-Schools. This has been a great success and two Ambassador Eco-Schools are profiled in the outcomes section of this case study.

The Eco-Schools program in Northern Ireland is free to join and schools work through the awards at their own pace. The program is adaptable to each individual school environment, which has led to all schools from Nursery (aged 3 years) to Post Primary (aged up to 18 years) and special educational needs schools becoming involved. The program is now expanding into third level education (university) through the EcoCampus program.

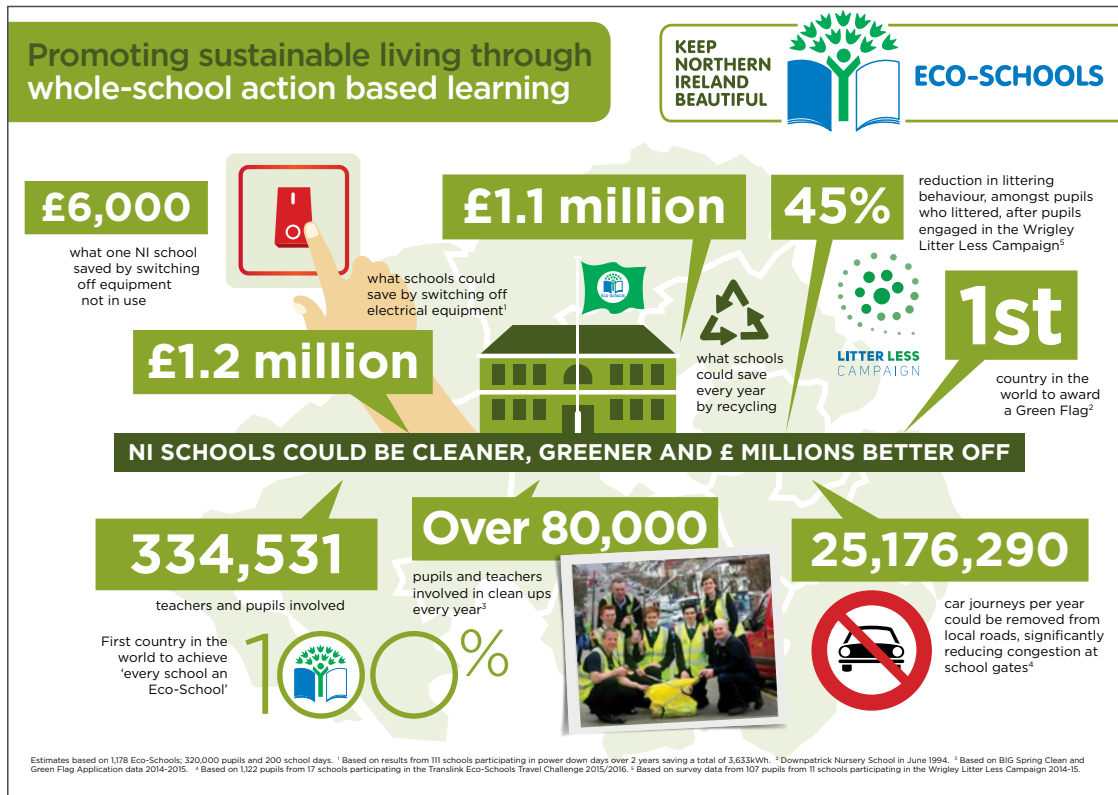
Partnership with our local authorities and colleges, delivery partners (other environmental and educational organizations and charities), and sponsors has helped in the success of delivering Eco-Schools in NI. Linking the program to curriculum objectives, including pupil development and critical thinking skills, has also been instrumental in encouraging schools to take part, along with the possibility of making real financial savings through recycling and reducing energy bills.



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Outcomes

Monitoring and Evaluation is one of the Seven Steps of the Eco-Schools framework that requires schools to measure, discuss, and act on their results. All of our projects were developed to include a form of measurement and these results were gathered to provide figures such as those illustrated below. This was a laborious process and a need for more homogenous results was identified. In response to this we developed an online 'Data Zone' which schools can use to track their progress and submit results as part of their Green Flag application. We hope to harvest robust results for all ten eco topics from the Data Zone. 2017/18 is the first year of this project and we anticipate exciting results in June 2018.



Some initial data monitoring and evaluation results indicate the following:

- Energy 'Power Down Days' in 2013 and 2014 saved an average of 32.7kWh/school; if every school in NI participated a saving of £1.2 million per year could be achieved.
- Two schools achieved zero waste to landfill status from 2013 after participation in waste recycling challenge.
- Participation in the Wrigley Litter Less project saw a 45% reduction in pupil littering in 2015.
- Travel to school by sustainable transport rose by 21% during the 2017 Translink Travel Challenge.

The best examples of qualitative results have come from the teachers directly or from their Green Flag applications. We have collected these results in case studies over the years and have included two examples on the following page.

**Ballycraig Primary School,
Antrim, Northern Ireland – 140 pupils**



Ballycraig Primary became an Eco-School in 2005. The school, situated in a socially deprived area, had experienced anti-social behavior in the past. The grounds of the school were also an uninspiring mixture of tarmac and hard surfaces. From humble beginnings and driven by the dedication and determination of its staff, the program was slowly introduced into the consciousness of the local population. It all started with hens! The school rescued hens from intensive farming and nursed them back to health at the school. Parents were approached for help to look after the hens during the weekends and schools holidays. There was no looking back from there. Pupils and parents together have worked over the years to develop a heritage garden, a vegetable garden, a polytunnel, a pond, an outdoor fitness trail, a wildlife trail, and wildflower areas. Through funding applications and competition prizes the school has raised over £60,000 for their eco work. Now every pupil in the school has access to outdoor learning and a greater understanding of the biodiversity and history of their area. The school has worked with many community organizations and helped a local Nursery develop their own outdoor areas.

A 'Green Gym' gardening club is available to parent groups using the school facilities. As a result of this there is a much greater sense of community involvement in the school and anti-social problems are a thing of the past. Ballycraig Primary is a great example of how a whole community can benefit from having an active Eco-School at its heart. Ballycraig Primary now has 5 Green Flags and is an Ambassador Eco-School. (See Appendix A for Interview with Ballycraig teacher.)



Ballycraig P.S. pupils work to repot seedlings in their school polytunnel.

**Mill Strand Integrated School and Nursery,
Portrush, Northern Ireland – 245 pupils**



Integrated education in Northern Ireland has grown from the will of parents wishing to see their children educated with peers from all religions and from across the community. The desire to found Mill Strand was such that a group of families re-mortgaged their homes to fund it and the school began in 1987. This grassroots start is reflected in a free thinking and innovative approach to education at the school which advocates for a variety of holistic and experiential learning methods. This mind-set is well suited to the Eco-Schools philosophy and the program has flourished at Mill Strand since they registered in 2007. The school is fortunate to be located on the spectacular Causeway Coast and makes frequent use of the nearby beaches and landscape for outdoor learning – pupils can often be found on the local beach undertaking various investigative activities. The school and pupils care deeply about protecting and caring for their environment and are keen litter collectors; they are the first school in NI to purchase a 2 Minute Beach Clean board for their local community. Following concerns raised by a pupil, the school recently banned the use of plastic straws. Mill Strand is an excellent example of innovative learning and free-thinking complementing the Eco-Schools program. They have five Green Flags and are an Ambassador Eco-School. (See Appendix B for Interview with Mill Strand Teacher.)



Mill Strand Integrated School pupils enjoy outdoor learning on their local beach.

Evaluation plan



Evaluation has been continual and ongoing since the implementation of the program in NI.

We study the impact and participation results and seek areas of strength or weakness to build or improve on, from streamlining our own processes, to encouraging schools to submit data (via the newly developed online Data Zone), and apply for awards.

The most difficult areas to gather data on are behavior change and the extent to which the program empowers our pupils to become change makers in their communities. There has been an abundance of qualitative information offered by teachers over the years; however, consideration is being given to developing more robust research into these areas.

As part of the Wrigley Litter Less Campaign, an international campaign run through FEE, research was undertaken in 2015/16 which indicated an improvement in behavior and opinion leadership in the topic of Litter and Waste in participating pupils after the campaign compared to a control group:

- Participant Behavior around Litter and Waste had an overall 15-25 percent positive change
- Participant Opinion Leadership around Litter and Waste had an overall 20-25 percent positive change

In 2017 Eco-Schools NI invited teachers and pupils from 10 post-primary schools to participate in an Eco-Leadership training course facilitated by Queen's University Belfast. The course was designed to support teachers in growing the program in their schools. The evaluation report showed 100 percent of the participating teachers felt they had improved their levels of capability and confidence in delivering the Eco-Schools program after their participation in the training. The report also found interesting results from pupil participation in the leadership themed workshops:

At the beginning of the workshop pupils were asked to define, in three words, what they understood by leadership. The words they most often picked were "control", "boss", "power" etc. Pupils were asked if they considered themselves leaders and virtually none did. Participants then explored a wider definition of leadership, using an exercise to demonstrate that anyone can be a leader, and that leadership – particularly in the context of Eco-Schools – is about facilitating, enabling, and encouraging rather than control and command. When asked the same question, "Do you think of yourself as a leader?" at the end of the workshop, the majority of pupils now replied that they did.

Our challenge now is to look at building on these results and considering what needs to be done to encourage our young people to become leaders. What tools can we provide that are not currently available through the standard education system? Can we work with that system, perhaps enhance it, or do we work outside it?

Lessons learned

- The Eco-Schools framework is an excellent one for delivering EE in any country around the world and provides enough flexibility, both in country and in schools, to be successful in diverse communities and situations.
- It is important to get the 'buy in' of the schools and to demonstrate how the program will benefit them, perhaps even before an interest in the environment has motivated them. In particular, demonstrating how the program complemented the curriculum, and how it could save a school money, was very useful. What we have seen time and again is that once a teacher and the pupils involve themselves in environmental work then it is their passion which carries them forward to achieve amazing things.
- Northern Ireland is a small country and any organization's success here rests on its reputation. We have consistently delivered effective results to our funders, particularly the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and supporters. **We have carefully built good working relationships with like-minded organizations and worked with them to achieve common goals.** It is this wider network of partner organizations, and of course the dedication of our schools, that has made Eco-Schools such a successes in Northern Ireland.



Resources

- www.eco-schoolsni.org
- www.ecoschools.global

Contact:

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, Eco-Schools
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Appendix A. Ballycraigy Teacher Interview

Interview with Jocelyn Brown, Teacher and Ballycraigy Eco-Schools Coordinator.

- **What has surprised you about this program or practice?**

The school's environmental success has increasingly been recognised by different bodies ranging from the local council to the Royal Horticultural Society. Eco-Schools supplied the framework to base all our work on. It provides major topic areas for us to develop and we certainly succeeded in Outdoor Learning and Biodiversity. Other areas such as managing Litter, Waste, Transport and Healthy Living were vastly improved in our school over the years. Our dogged determination and consistent leadership have helped us get this far. Much support and encouragement from our partners was certainly valued, thus creating behaviour changes in the pupils who became involved in the projects.

- **What did you learn along the way that sticks with you?**

There is no harm in asking people! The involvement of the school community has amazed me and the many friendships that have evolved out of it. Of course our successes and wins in competitions stand out, but hopefully the next generation will learn from all the activities that they have taken part in. Both the teachers, the community and the pupils have had many new experiences which have combined together to produce a wonderful project. There's now a real community ethos around outdoor activities in the school.

- **What were one or two of the most important outcomes?**

The most important outcomes include developing creativity and problem solving abilities that we can tap in to, especially from the pupils, teachers, parents and local community. There is a 'depth' in each of these groupings which we continually tap into. The skill of the project leader was spotting this and providing goals for each group to aim at so we could achieve these high standards. When we did not win a gardening competition, we questioned why. This made us evaluate our standards. We wanted to win it the next year – a new heritage garden resulted! We did win the following year.

Another outcome was the fun and 'craic' we had. Everyone in the school, regardless of their position, got involved and got their hands dirty together.

We have now our own separate bank account to manage and deploy, and this gave us independence.

- **If this program or practice is ongoing, why is it important? What do you hope it will accomplish over time?**

Certainly this practice is ongoing. The original grandfather, who helped us as we embarked in the early years, has now retired. It was daunting to set out on our own but as each school year has progressed, the school Board of Governors, the staff, the Parent/Teacher Association and the local community have seen the benefits of outdoor learning. They have fully backed each new project and continue to source new helpers to support the continuity of environmental education. They have noted the benefits of working outdoors and the relationship between outdoor learning and pupil behaviour, especially for some boys as they progressed up the school; they like the sense of responsibility it gives them. This all fits in with our school's UNCRC ethos and is reflected in what we do every day. The 'feel good' factor has been broadcast by the children as they proudly bring groups around their school grounds on 'open days'. They have been empowered to share good practice. This ethos requires nurturing and all those involved in the School's Eco projects look out for one another.

Appendix B. Mill Strand Teacher Interview

Interview with Deirdre Doherty, Teacher and Mill Strand Eco-School Coordinator.

- **What has surprised you about this program or practice?**

That people usually care about “their” environment, immediately effecting themselves and their loved ones. Now there are more people who think on a bigger scale, who think about the bigger picture. There are many organizations that are linked by their marine work (or their marine hobbies) to the environment. There is still a long way to go. These local organizations have been so supportive of our school and the work that we do.

- **What did you learn along the way that sticks with you?**

Integrated Education aims to provide children with a caring and enhanced educational experience; empowering them as individuals is a priority for staff. With this in mind, Mill Strand has embraced the way we can effect positive change by using our unique marine environment to provide pupils with opportunities to make a difference. What we have learnt along the way is that as we became involved with the whole school community and engaged with local organizations and expertise, this began to be embedded in practice. We now have a bank of support to assist us in our educational programs.

- **What were one or two of the most important outcomes?**

The most important outcomes for Mill Strand are:

1. Becoming an Ambassador Eco-School, this has been such a privilege and great recognition for the work the pupils carry out at Mill Strand.
2. Sharing our Eco-Schools work with local cluster schools, external organizations, and universities while providing training, resources and support for teachers, academics and pupils. We have a passion for sharing our experiences with others for the benefit of pupils in other schools.

- **If this program or practice is ongoing, why is it important? What do you hope it will accomplish over time?**

Education has a huge part to play and can make a difference over time. By ceasing the use of plastic drinking straws at Mill Strand we are making a noticeable difference, one that can be measured and shared with others. We believe this program can be rolled out nationally to other schools, with help and support. We are enthusiastic and passionate that we can make a difference.

Our oceans are in danger, the recent ‘Blue Planet II’ episodes on the BBC have helped to educate and raise awareness to a wider audience on the dangers facing marine life and indeed the food chain. We need to drive home the point that we need to stop the flow of plastic into the ocean to protect marine life. By taking part in regular beach cleans we are educating children while protecting our environment for future generations.