



BACK-TO-SCHOOL SUPPLIES: A ZERO WASTE GUIDE

Fall is an exciting and busy time as parents, teachers, and students prepare for a new school year. Back-to-school is a great time to gather school items that promote environmental sustainability and save you money each year. Working together to incorporate zero waste can be simple and fun too. Start your school year off right with these zero waste back-to-school tips!



REUSING SUPPLIES

Home

Shop at home first and reuse or refurbish items from previous years. Identify which school supplies are still in good condition for reuse. Avoid purchasing new versions of these items until your child has gotten full use from the ones they already own.

- Some commonly reused school supplies may include binders, backpacks, notebooks, scissors, pencil pouches, and rulers.
- Used items can be easily [refurbished](#) through simple steps such as tearing out used paper in notebooks, taping over small tears in folders or binders, or sewing work on backpacks or clothing.
- Blogs and websites like Pinterest have many DIY craft ideas for refurbishing and decorating old school supplies.

Friends, family, neighbors

Ask friends, family, or neighbors if they have any extra or lightly used school supplies and clothing that they do not need. This will help your child acquire their necessary supplies while helping other families clear out clutter. Consider scheduling an annual clothing or supplies swap where families bring items that they do not plan on reusing. Finish the event by donating any unswapped items.

Thrift stores

Thrift stores can be a great source for new clothes, often selling name brands at a fraction of retail prices. Many thrift stores also have an office supply section where lightly used school supplies can be found. If in the Chicagoland area, visit [The Waste Shed](#) or the [Creative Reuse Warehouse](#) to shop for used school supplies.

BUYING NEW SUPPLIES

Reduce non-recyclables

Less plastic: When you must purchase new products, choose products that are durable and can be recycled once they have been worn down, such as:

- Metal or wooden rulers
- Metal pencil sharpeners
- Metal safety scissors
- More durable folders
- Binders made with paper- or plant-based materials
- Spiral notebooks without plastic covers or folders



Bulk products: Purchase items in bulk to reduce the amount of packaging required for each item. Buying in bulk is not only more environmentally sustainable, it can also save money.

Use durable, long-lasting products

Purchase durable products that you expect to last several years, and handle these items with care. Items that could be reused over multiple years include backpacks, pencil pouches, rulers, pencil sharpeners, scissors, paper clips, mechanical pencils, locker accessories, and calculators. When initially purchasing these products, consider buying classic or simple designs that children are less likely to outgrow.



Support eco-friendly production

Look for items that are produced in a sustainable way such as school supplies that are:

- Sourced from recycled material (look for the highest percentage of post-consumer recycled content)
- Made with non-toxic and non-hazardous material such as [PVC-free products](#)
- Packaged in material that is recyclable or reusable
- Labeled with sustainability seals or certifications such as the [Forest Stewardship Council](#) seal on paper and pencils

Most standard retailers will highlight their eco-friendly products on the product tag or their website. Another option might be to purchase a pre-bundled sustainable school supply kits, which are offered by some online retailers such as [Green ABCs](#) and [Wisdom Supply](#).

ZERO WASTE LUNCH SUPPLIES

Save money and make less garbage by packing a zero waste lunch from home. Instead of buying disposable products that get used only once, pack a zero waste lunch with washable food and drink containers, utensils, and cloth napkins. Buying food in bulk and portioning it into your own containers also typically costs less than buying food in single-serve packaging. Visit Eco-Cycle's [website](#) to learn more.



WAYS FOR TEACHERS TO PROMOTE MORE SUSTAINABLE SUPPLIES

If you are a teacher, it can be easy and less expensive to promote sustainability through your school supplies decisions.

Supplies list: Discuss with co-workers and administrators the idea of creating a school supplies list that promotes reuse, durability, and sustainability. A sustainable list might include items that are easy to reuse or recycle, as well as a note on sustainability.



- Consider alternatives to plastic bags, such as paper envelopes.
- Consider paring down the school supply list and asking families to contribute money to a classroom supplies fund. This fund can be used by the teacher to cover the cost of additional supplies that the class may need on an as needed basis. This may also allow the teacher to purchase some supplies, such as wipes and hand sanitizer, in larger sizes or in bulk, which cuts down on packaging waste and may also be more cost effective.
- Recommend eco-friendly soaps and cleaners if parents are required to purchase those.

Classroom supplies: When gathering supplies for your own classroom, keep in mind the places you might find used or recyclable supplies. Consider visiting organizations such as [SCARCE](#), which allows teachers and administrators to access donated school supplies. If in the Chicagoland area, visit [The Waste Shed](#) or the [Creative Reuse Warehouse](#) to shop for used school supplies.

Make supplies communal to eliminate the need for labeling items. This also makes it easier to use supplies from one year to the next. At the end of the school year, collect supplies, such as scissors and rulers, to use again the following year. Be sure to remove these items from your supply list. The classroom supplies fund mentioned above can be used to replace any items that may have gotten lost during the school year.