



COVID-19 and Green Schools

Keeping Everyone Safe, Saving Money, & Protecting the Environment

As schools make tough decisions about how to operate during the pandemic, administrators may be struggling with the best ways to retain activities and practices that support your school's environmental programs to reduce waste and conserve natural resources. This toolkit provides guidance on how to keep valuable green schools programs and activities intact—many of which were built by students—while also keeping your school safe and within budget.



Natural Resources
Council of Maine

3 Wade Street
Augusta, ME 04330
(207) 622-3101

nrcm.org

Lunch Time

Strategy 1: Increase the length of the lunch period.

- ✓ **Makes time for handwashing, social distancing, and/or outdoor eating**
- ✓ **Proven to reduce food waste¹**

For managing COVID, increasing the length of the lunch period will be important for ensuring time for handwashing after meals. This strategy has been proven to help kids eat more of the food they are given so that waste is reduced. Plus, kids who have eaten a full, healthy meal are better prepared for classroom activities.

Strategy 2: Pack-it-in, pack-it-out lunchrooms

- ✓ **This policy prevents unnecessary trips to common areas such as waste stations**
- ✓ **Have students bring their own reusable napkins, silverware, and beverage containers²**

Reduce sharing by having students who bring lunch from home re-pack waste into their lunchbox and bring it home for disposal. This can reduce the number of trips taken to waste stations and promote social distancing. Parents can be encouraged to pack lunches with reusable food ware, knowing that their student is expected to return home with it. The “pack-it-in, pack-it-out” philosophy is one used in environmental stewardship to protect natural areas from litter, and it is a great way to remind students that their waste doesn't “just go away.”

Tip: Send the attached Zero Waste Lunchbox Checklist home with students

Strategy 3: Zero waste recipes for hot lunches

- ✓ **Recipes are designed to reduce the need for costly disposable food wares**
- ✓ **Simplifies and reduces time at waste stations and burden on custodial staff**
- ✓ **Reduces the number of surfaces that students and staff come in to contact with**

Many popular recipes already on the menu don't require disposable food ware to be eaten. Foods like sandwiches, pizza, bagels, fruits, and veggies can be put right on a washable tray. There is widespread consensus among healthcare professionals that

1 Juliana F.W. Cohen, et al. “The Amount of Time to Eat Lunch is Associated with Children's Selection and Consumption of School Meal Entrée, Fruits, Vegetable, and Milk.” *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* (2016): 123-128

2 Maine Department of Education. “Pre-K-Adult Education Public Health Guidance.” *Maine Department of Education Coronavirus Update*, Maine Department of Education, Aug. 2020, mainedoesnews.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PK-Adult-Ed-Reopening-Public-Health-Guidance-v.13-alt-1.pdf.

disposable items aren't any safer than reusable items when it comes to stopping the spread of COVID-19.³ Using more zero waste recipes can help your district save money and help maintain social distancing practices.

In the Classroom and Common Areas

Strategy 4: Personal reusable water bottles

- ✓ **Water refill stations allow students to get water without putting their faces near the source⁴**
- ✓ **Drinking more water is great for student health**
- ✓ **Reduces need for disposable plastic bottles and builds good habits**

Ask students to bring reusable water bottles with them to school so that they can stay hydrated during class. Prioritize the use of touchless water refill stations or sink faucets as a way to reduce the need for students to put their faces close to the spouts of traditional fountains. This strategy is great for boosting good habits of health and sustainability while saving your school money on costly disposables.

Strategy 5: Invite staff to use cloth rags for cleaning

- ✓ **Saves district money; easy to make and staff can bring and use their own**
- ✓ **Regular washing of cloth material is effective at controlling COVID-19⁵**

Let staff know they can choose to bring washcloths for classroom wipe-downs. This can reduce the need for custodial staff to enter classrooms to remove excess trash or drop off disposable paper towels. This practice will also reduce the need for teachers to visit common storage spaces where disposables would be kept.

Strategy 6: Walk and bike to school

- ✓ **Supports social distancing for students and bus drivers⁶**
- ✓ **Builds healthy habits and kids love it**
- ✓ **Reduces harmful air pollution and can save the district money**

Walking or biking to school always gets kids excited. Studies show that when kids get more physical activity, they do better in school.⁷ These activities promote social distancing, healthy habits, and are good for school sustainability.

Strategy 7: Create outdoor classrooms

- ✓ **Outdoor classrooms can help with social distancing and ventilation⁸**
- ✓ **Kids love learning outdoors; fosters a connection to the environment**

You can create outdoor spaces by bringing desks & marker boards outside, using logs as stools, or hanging tarps for shade. Invite students and community volunteers to help create outdoor learning spaces.

³ "Health Expert Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables And COVID-19." *Break Free From Plastic*, Greenpeace, 23 June 2020, storage.googleapis.com/planet4-international-stateless/2020/06/26618dd6-health-expert-statement-reusables-safety.pdf.

⁴ Maine Department of Education. "Pre-K-Adult Education Public Health Guidance." *Maine Department of Education Coronavirus Update*, Maine Department of Education, Aug. 2020, mainedoews.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PK-Adult-Ed-Reopening-Public-Health-Guidance-v.13-alt-1.pdf.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance*. Atlanta, GA; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Department of Health and Human Services; 2010.

⁶ Maine Department of Education. "Pre-K-Adult Education Public Health Guidance." *Maine Department of Education Coronavirus Update*, Maine Department of Education, Aug. 2020, mainedoews.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PK-Adult-Ed-Reopening-Public-Health-Guidance-v.13-alt-1.pdf.

⁷ Maine Health. "K-5 School Tools." *Let's Go! | Portland, ME*, Maine Health, 2020, mainehealth.org/lets-go/childrens-program/schools/k-5-school-tools.

⁸ Maine Department of Education. "Pre-K-Adult Education Public Health Guidance." *Maine Department of Education Coronavirus Update*, Maine Department of Education, Aug. 2020, mainedoews.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PK-Adult-Ed-Reopening-Public-Health-Guidance-v.13-alt-1.pdf.



Many of these strategies are measurable and will require some creativity. Because of that, they can double as learning projects for students. These strategies can also be made possible by engaging your local Parent Teacher Organization or putting a call out to the community for help on social media platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented enormous challenges, but also opportunities to make changes in the school day that many students, teachers, and staff have long wished for to encourage healthy, safe practices that protect our environment.

As always, NRCM is here to help. Please get in touch with Chrissy Adamowicz, Sustainable Maine Outreach Coordinator at chrissy@nrcm.org if you need help brainstorming or trouble shooting! We are in this together.



Natural Resources
Council of Maine

3 Wade Street
Augusta, ME 04330
(207) 622-3101

nrcm.org