

Eco-Schools U.S. Certification Rubric

Levels of Achievement

Please refer to the Eco-Schools Framework and the rubric below for guidance on the criteria Eco-Schools U.S. uses to assess school action plans. Eco-Schools' assessors evaluate your plan based on the rubric. Be sure your plan thoroughly reflects the incredible work the school community is implementing.

 Participant PROGRAM INITIATED The Eco-Schools program was initiated, an action team is in place, and long-term plans are explored. Participant schools: ☐ Create an action plan in the ECA. ☐ Align their plan with the Eco-Schools Framework. ☐ Upload their EcoCode. ☐ Begin exploring and identifying school collaborations and community partners. ☐ Identify student leadership opportunities. ☐ Consistently share stories. ☐ Effectively describe actions and provide documentation. ☐ Submit application before deadline. ☐ Achieve at least 35 points.	 Bronze EMERGING PROGRAM The Eco-Schools program is in its early stages and some environmental learning and action has been demonstrated. Bronze schools: ☐ Create an action plan in the ECA. ☐ Align their plan with the Eco-Schools Framework. ☐ Upload their EcoCode. ☐ Build opportunities to engage more of the school community. ☐ Establish family and school district collaborations. ☐ Establish student leadership opportunities. ☐ Consistently share stories. ☐ Effectively describe actions and provide documentation. ☐ Submit application before deadline. ☐ Achieve at least 50-64 points.	 Silver DEVELOPING PROGRAM The Eco-Schools program is in development and environmental learning and action has been demonstrated throughout the school. Silver schools: ☐ Create an action plan in the ECA. ☐ Align their plan with the Eco-Schools Framework. ☐ Upload their EcoCode. ☐ 30-50% of school community engages in Eco-Schools. ☐ Establish family and school district collaborations and explore community partnerships. ☐ Student leadership opportunities are the norm. ☐ Consistently share stories. ☐ Effectively describe actions and provide documentation. ☐ Submit application before deadline. ☐ Achieve at least 65-79 points.	 Gold ACCOMPLISHED PROGRAM The Eco-Schools program has a strong foundation and the majority of the school community engaged. Environmental learning and action is well-integrated throughout the school year. Gold schools: ☐ Create an action plan in the ECA. ☐ Align their plan with the Eco-Schools Framework. ☐ Upload their EcoCode. ☐ 50-75% of school community engages in Eco-Schools. ☐ Continue building family and school district collaborations and community partnerships that are moving toward reciprocity. ☐ Student leadership opportunities are the norm. ☐ Consistently share stories. ☐ Effectively describe actions and provide documentation. ☐ Submit application before deadline. ☐ Achieve at least 80-99 points.	 Green Flag EXCEPTIONAL PROGRAM The Eco-Schools program is well-established. Environmental learning and action are a defining element of school culture, extending beyond the school walls. Green Flag schools: ☐ Create an action plan in the ECA. ☐ Align their plan with the Eco-Schools Framework. ☐ Upload their EcoCode. ☐ 75-100% of school community engages in Eco-Schools. ☐ Collaborations with families, school districts, and community partners are mostly reciprocal. ☐ Student leadership opportunities are the norm. ☐ Consistently share stories. ☐ Effectively describe actions and provide documentation. ☐ Submit application before deadline. ☐ Achieve 100+ points.
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Additional Guidance

There are three main areas where we as assessors see schools fall short of their anticipated certification goals, **whole school engagement, community engagement, and detail in the *Action Description* within each action card**. Below we provide additional guidance to support student-led, school-based action teams in submitting a strong application for certification, including in depth examples on the last page.

Whole-School Engagement Matters

All action teams and their contributions matter! It is essential that a primary goal is to involve the whole school in your school's Eco-Schools program. **Building toward whole-school engagement can take time.** A whole-school approach to Eco-Schools ensures that sustainability becomes part of a school's culture rather than just an activity in one classroom or club. When the entire school community works together, sustainability is woven into teaching, learning, service, operations, and community engagement, creating lasting impact for students, staff, the community, and the environment. What does this mean for certification?

Whole-school engagement is required for those seeking a Green Flag. We ask a question in the ***About Your Eco-Schools Program*** action card, "Including your action team, how many individual students were engaged across all action cards?" This is one way we look at whole-school engagement. If this number is relatively low, consider what work the team has done to communicate the action(s) to the school community and how the school community has been invited to participate in specific actions. You can communicate whole-school engagement through each action card's ***Action Description*** as assessors will be looking for how the team engaged the school community.

Tips

- **Get more of your school community involved as members of the action team.** Consider how you can bring in custodial staff, food services, facilities, and school and district staff. If they cannot be members of the team, how can they be meaningfully engaged, and their expertise valued.
- **Does the school community know you are an Eco-School?** Develop a plan to keep a steady drumbeat of Eco-Schools news going out to the school community, letting them know what you are doing, the impact it's having, and how they can get involved. Share that the school community is partnering with National Wildlife Federation's Eco-Schools U.S. program and why. Let them know they are a part of a global network of schools and students taking action for the planet, for wildlife, and for the community.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is another essential program element and is a component of the Eco-Schools Framework. As a reminder, **following the Eco-Schools Framework is required at all certification levels.** The goal of community engagement is to move toward reciprocal relationships. What does this mean? Reciprocal relationships are considered

- mutually beneficial
- collaborative
- built on shared values
- long-term

Student-led action teams are integral to identifying, contacting, and working toward collaborative stewardship to develop and support shared solutions.

Tips

- Identify community members who are working on similar issues as those found in the school's action plan.
- Identify and implement ways you can support each other's goals. This may look like students volunteering at partner events.
- Partners can be within or outside of the school-district.
- Consider reaching out to your district community engagement office to learn more about the relationships that may already exist and to learn about policies that may exist when engaging community partners.

Action Description

The *Action Description* at the end of each action card's certification questions is the most important response the team provides. **These questions carry the most points and help the assessor clearly understand what happened at your school.** Be specific and consistent. If details are missing or numbers don't match, points may be deducted. Use the prompt to guide your explanation, share who was involved, highlight community partnerships, and describe the impact. Always make sure your metrics match what you wrote in the Action Description.

If you do not share details with us, then we do not know what happened. **Please note: Responding to every question does not mean you will receive full points.** Assessors are looking to see that your responses make sense/appear valid. Below are two examples where assessors would deduct points:

- If your response to the certification question: *How many native trees were planted?*, is 10, and the action description reports 50 native trees were planted, then there is a discrepancy.
- If the action team selects three types of partners worked with, but the *Action Description* does not mention working with any partners or notes only one partner the school collaborated with, then there is a discrepancy.

Tips

- Read the *Action Description* prompt carefully. Include as many details as possible.
- Assessors are looking to see:
 - how much of the school community was engaged/how you tried to engage the entire school community
 - evidence of the Eco-Schools Framework—this includes community partnerships
 - action impact
- Double check your metrics against what is written in the *Action Description*.

Example 1: Green Flag Candidate's Action Description—Points Deducted

Students in my science classes wanted to learn more about air pollution, specifically indoor air pollution. Students conducted research and shared what they learned with their classmates. They then worked together to determine the next actions they wanted to take. Students are excited to continue their investigation.

~Courtesy of a fictitious school, Let's Talk Air Action Card

Can you identify ways this school can improve its *Action Description*? See below.

Notes for Improvement

- How can the whole school engage in this action?
- Provide details related to the actions taken, beyond learning about the topic.
- Was there a community partner?/Who was the community partner?
- Provide evidence that the team followed the Eco-Schools Framework.
- Explain the impact that taking this action had. For example, social-emotionally, in the school community, or in the community; it would be best to speak to each.

Example 2: Green Flag Candidate's Action Description—Full Points Awarded

This year, our school implemented a vertical hydroponic gardening system as part of our sustainability efforts using the Eco-Schools Framework. We focused on the pillars of Environmental Learning, Stewardship and Community, and Climate Action to ensure that the initiative not only reduced our ecological footprint but also deepened student understanding and engagement. The system was incorporated into our school's EcoAction Plan, aligning with our goals to reduce food waste, promote local and sustainable food production, and enhance environmental literacy through hands-on learning.

To support the success of this initiative, we engaged several community partners. A local hydroponics supplier assisted with the setup and provided ongoing technical guidance. We also formed partnerships with a nearby food bank to donate produce and collaborated with local chefs and food educators who led cooking demonstrations and sustainability workshops. These partnerships added depth to the project by connecting classroom learning with real-world applications and community needs.

Students played a central role throughout the project. The hydroponic system was used across multiple subject areas, including science, math, technology, and language arts. Students monitored plant growth, managed nutrient levels, tracked data, and wrote reflections and reports on the process. Members of our school's EcoTeam led the maintenance schedule and helped plan awareness campaigns around sustainable food systems. Art classes created posters and labels for the produce, and the entire school community became involved through regular updates, tastings, and produce donations. This turned the hydroponic garden into a truly school-wide initiative.

The impact on students and the broader school community was significant. Academically, the system provided a living lab for STEM and sustainability education, making abstract concepts more tangible and engaging. It also fostered cross-curricular connections and encouraged inquiry-based learning. The produce grown was used in the school cafeteria and donated to local organizations, creating a direct connection between student efforts and community benefit. Social-emotionally, the project instilled a sense of responsibility, collaboration, and purpose. Students took pride in caring for the plants and contributing to a cause larger than themselves. Many reported feeling more connected to their peers, their school, and their community. For some students, especially those who struggle in traditional learning environments, the project offered a hands-on, meaningful way to engage and succeed.

Overall, the implementation of our hydroponic system was a powerful example of how environmental action, academic learning, and community service can come together to create lasting impact.

~Courtesy of an intermediate school in Ohio, Indoor Gardening and Greenhouses Action Card