EcoSchools United States
Program & Certification Guide
2023-2024
Table of Contents
Click on any heading below to go to the corresponding page.

Welcome to the EcoSchools U.S. Program! .................. 3
How to use this guide .......................................................... 4
Steps to certification .......................................................... 5
Levels of certification and assessment ...................... 7
Getting Started on the EcoSchools U.S
Certification Application (ECA) ................................. 8
Program deadlines, assessment, and appeals .......... 9
Annual Calendar .............................................................. 10
The EcoSchools U.S. Certification Rubric ............... 11
Certification Guide 2023-24
Welcome to the EcoSchools U.S. Program!

EcoSchools U.S. certification represents environmental excellence for PK-12 schools in the United States. Participation in the program allows students, teachers, school administrators, custodians, and parents to get a clear picture of their current environmental practices and take action to reduce their environmental footprint.

Each year, schools apply for certification by undertaking environmental actions, campaigns, and projects, and then recording them in the online EcoSchools U.S. Certification Application (ECA) to earn points. At the end of the year, school applications are assessed based on a standard established over 10 years of benchmarking and are awarded a final certification level.

All U.S. Schools
All schools in the United States can participate and certify with the EcoSchools U.S. program free of charge.

Our Statement of Purpose
Our programming works in collaboration with communities to provide K12 education that is responsive to and supports student leadership and equitable solutions to collectively build a more ecologically and socially just world.

Our Vision
NWF Education strives to support communities in creating resilient, just spaces for people and wildlife to thrive.

We Value...
- Accountability
- Authenticity
- Collaboration
- Equity & Justice
- Growth & Learning
- Kindness & Compassion
- Well-Being and Belonging
- Vision & Purpose Focused

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Certification Guide 2023-24

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to support your school throughout the certification process. It outlines the EcoSchools U.S. program, provides details on the assessment process and levels of certification, and will give you a sense of how to prepare for the year ahead.

Quick Links

**EcoSchools U.S. Certification Application (ECA)**

Where schools can register and participate in the EcoSchools U.S. program. Check it out here! *(Coming soon!)*

**ECA Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ’s)**

Find answers to frequently asked questions about the EcoSchools U.S. certification program and online application, here.

**Webinars | Training**

View and register for free webinars (live and recorded) offered throughout the year, as well as how-to videos to help on your EcoSchools journey, here.

**Sign up for EcoSchools Updates**

Stay connected to EcoSchools U.S. by signing up for our monthly communication. These communications keep you up-to-date on new program resources and so much more.

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Certification Guide 2023-24
EcoSchools Framework to Certification

EcoSchools U.S. is an annual certification program that supports and recognizes environmental action in schools. Certification runs between September 1st and June 30th of each year. School activities that happen in July or August can be claimed in the following year’s application.

Authentically Engage the Community
Build intentional, authentic relationships within and outside the school building and share widely the transformational stories that grow from working at the intersection of the environment, the community, and the economy.

Form An Action Team
Form a school and community-based committee that is student-led. Together, their diverse abilities and perspectives will be the driving force behind the environment-based education and actions taken on behalf of the school community.

Develop an Action Plan
Annually develop an action plan by identifying areas for improvement. Build a plan that leans into the committee’s values and promotes nature-based solutions for all in the community.

Green Flag Eligibility Questionnaire Deadline: Last Friday in January (January 26, 2024)

Take Action, Collect Data, and Measure Impact
Investigate nature and community-based solutions to the issues important to the community and that make up the team’s action plan. Use a systems-thinking mindset and measure the school’s actions’ impact. Communicate and share frequently using accessible, facts-based storytelling to inform, raise awareness, and make calls to action, always welcoming collaboration and conversation.

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Monitor and Evaluate Progress
Collecting data pre- and post-action will help the committee monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their plan's activities and events. Regularly update the school community on action progress and outcomes.

Submissions Open: First Friday in April (April 5, 2024)
Final Submission Deadline: First Friday in June (June 7, 2024)

Identify Curricular Connections
The team's action plan will align with the district's desire to educate the whole child. Identifying curricular connections supports the school's goals and objectives for academic improvement and success, nurtures students' social-emotional well-being, fosters good health and nutrition, and promotes family and community engagement.

Establish an Eco-Code and Celebrate
A celebration is in order! Take time to recognize the hard work of everyone involved and the amazing impact on the school community. As an action team, reflect on what worked well and where the team can improve so future action teams can build on success. Prominently display the school's statement.

The EcoCode creatively and artistically reflects the school community's commitment to nature-based solutions that benefit all wildlife and people. This can look like a song, poem, written word, collaborative art, etc.

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Throughout the school year, schools complete actions in the online application and earn points towards their certification. The depth and extent of this completed environment and nature-based actions will determine the school’s final certification level.

The four levels of certification a school can achieve are described below. Please see the Certification Rubric on page 11 for more details on how we assess applications.

**Levels of Certification**

- **Bronze: 50–64 points**
  If you're new to EcoSchools or want to focus on a few key actions this year, we suggest aiming for Bronze certification. It is important to start slow and lay a foundation for environmental learning and action at your school.

- **Silver: 65–79 points**
  Silver certification is suited to schools that have started to develop a solid foundation of environmental learning and action throughout their school community.

- **Gold: 80–99 points**
  Aiming for Gold certification is a challenge that will provide a comprehensive framework for environmental learning and action at your school.

- **Green Flag: 100+ points**
  Green Flag is the highest level of certification and a challenge that we recommend for schools that are ready to take on diverse environmental actions and engage their community. Please ensure you have reviewed the Green Flag Certification FAQ if your school is interested in pursuing the Green Flag level this year.

**Participant Schools**

Any school that creates a plan on the EcoSchools U.S. Certification Application but is unable to submit for certification (a minimum of 50 points) will be recognized as a Participant school. Participant recognition celebrates a school’s effort in taking environmental action and acknowledges a school’s attempt in becoming EcoSchools certified. Schools that are recognized as Participants will be awarded a digital Participant seal and are valuable members of the EcoSchools network, but are not considered certified EcoSchools.

When a school becomes a certified EcoSchool, they receive a digital certification seal that reflects their certification level. This seal can be displayed on a school’s website and social media accounts, in newsletters, in email signatures, and more.
Certification Guide 2023-24
Getting Started on the EcoSchools Certification Application (ECA)

Once you have registered for the EcoSchools program, it’s time to start exploring the ECA!

Your Dashboard

Track your school’s certification progress over the year. Use the blue navigation bar on the left side of your screen to navigate to different pages including:

- **Our Action Plan:** Where you can view and manage the actions you want to take this year.
- **Action Library:** Where you can view all the actions not currently in your plan.
- **Achievements:** Where you can view your school’s certification history and download past certification seals.
- **Impact:** Where you can view the impact of your school and the collective impact of all schools in the U.S. as we work towards a cleaner, healthier, sustainable future!

My Library

Gather your Action Team, go through the library, and choose actions to add to your school’s environmental action plan this year. Actions can be searched by keyword or theme. Actions can be added and removed throughout the year as your program becomes defined.

This is What an Action Looks Like!

An action includes:
- Information about the action, connections to the curriculum, and Sustainable Development Goals.
- An action guide, which provides simple steps to completing the action.
- Tools and resources to support learning and action on the environmental topics.
- Certification questions, which schools complete for points towards their certification level.

For more information on how to complete an action check out this short how-to video.

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Certification Guide 2023-24

Program deadlines, assessment, and appeals

Important Dates & Deadlines

Program Launch: The EcoSchools program launches each year in early September.

Green Flag Eligibility Questionnaire: Schools aiming for Green Flag certification must complete a short questionnaire by the last Friday in January. Please see this FAQ for more information.

Submissions open the first Friday in April!

FINAL Certification Deadline: Certification applications must be submitted through the ECA by the first Friday in June. Schools may claim actions or campaigns that are planned for after the certification deadline by completing the appropriate actions to the best of their ability.

Certification Assessment

School applications are assessed based on the information provided through the ECA. To be assessed and certify, schools must submit a completed application by the final EcoSchools deadline.

When a school submits their application, they submit at a particular level (based on the total number of points accumulated). The application is then verified by EcoSchools Assessors based on the data, documentation, and descriptions provided in the application. EcoSchools Assessors may contact applicants directly to verify values. Assessment may also include School Visits (see the FAQ for details). Should a school application exceed or not meet the criteria of their submitted certification level, their final certification level may be changed during the assessment process.

See the Certification Rubric on page 12 for more details on the assessment criteria.

Final Standings

During the assessment period, submitted action plans will be reviewed on a rolling basis. Once assessed, schools will be notified by email to view their certification results and any available feedback by logging into the ECA. If schools disagree with their certification results, they may engage in an Appeals process.

Appeal Process

EcoSchools U.S. makes every effort to ensure certification applications are assessed accurately and equitably. Should a school wish to appeal their final standing, they may complete this form.
This calendar provides an overview of the EcoSchools program and highlights key dates, events, and activities throughout the year. With the exception of program deadlines, the calendar is meant to act as a guide and can be adapted to include regional events and priorities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Important Dates</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September – October</td>
<td><strong>Registration Opens</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Clean Earth Challenge&lt;br&gt;• Students Rebuild (August-June)&lt;br&gt;• Trash or Treasure&lt;br&gt;• Farm to School Month&lt;br&gt;• Walk &amp; Roll to School Day&lt;br&gt;• Earth Science Week</td>
<td>Register your school, establish an Action Team, create a plan for the year, and let people at your school know how to get involved with the EcoSchools program. Don’t forget to update your online application as you complete actions. TIP! Initiate a waste-free lunch program at your school and consider ways to reduce waste throughout the year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November – December</td>
<td><strong>Green Flag Eligibility Questionnaire</strong>&lt;br&gt;(due Last Friday in January)&lt;br&gt;• Outdoor Classroom Day&lt;br&gt;• America Recycles Day&lt;br&gt;• World Soil Day&lt;br&gt;• Audubon Christmas Bird Count&lt;br&gt;• Winter Break</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for all students at your school to learn IN, ABOUT, and FOR the environment. Don’t forget to update your online application as you complete actions. TIP! Hosting an event for the holidays? Make it waste-free!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – February</td>
<td><strong>Submission Window Open</strong>&lt;br&gt;(first Friday in April)&lt;br&gt;• MLK Day of Service&lt;br&gt;• Great Backyard Bird Count</td>
<td>Start planning for outdoor gardening and planting projects. Don’t forget to update your online application as you complete actions. TIP! The winter is a great time to focus on energy. Start exploring energy at your school and run a campaign to reduce your carbon footprint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March – April</td>
<td><strong>Application Deadline</strong>&lt;br&gt;(First Friday in June)&lt;br&gt;• World Water Day&lt;br&gt;• Earth Month&lt;br&gt;• Clean Earth Challenge&lt;br&gt;• Spring Break</td>
<td>For Earth Day, engage your school in learning and action around environmental justice issues that are important to your local community. Don’t forget to update your online application as you complete actions. TIP! Conduct water quality tests or a macroinvertebrate survey to celebrate World Water Day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May – June</td>
<td><strong>Summer Break</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Garden for Wildlife™ Month&lt;br&gt;• Bike &amp; Roll to School Day&lt;br&gt;• Endangered Species Day&lt;br&gt;• World Oceans Day&lt;br&gt;• National Pollinator Week</td>
<td>Complete your online application and submit by the first Friday in June. Celebrate your school’s achievements! You will be notified by email of certification results. TIP! Help to reduce daily greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality in your community—get walking and rolling to school!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July – August</td>
<td><strong>Certification Guide 2023-24</strong>&lt;br&gt;Program deadlines, assessment, and appeals</td>
<td>Don’t forget about summer maintenance for your school garden and trees. Have a wonderful summer!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TIP! Follow us on social media for more EcoSchools activities and celebrations.

nwf.org/eco-schools-us | 10
The EcoSchools program was initiated, an action team is in place, and plans are being developed.

**Assessment Criteria by Level**

**Bronze**
- Program Elements have been started
- Achieve 50-64 points
- Submit application before deadline
- Program Elements are somewhat fulfilled
- Submittable Green Flag
- Green Flag

**Silver**
- Program Elements are mostly fulfilled
- Achieve 65-79 points
- Submit application before deadline
- Program Elements are complete
- Submittable Green Flag
- Green Flag

**Gold**
- Program Elements are fully fulfilled
- Achieve 80-99 points
- Submit application before deadline
- Program Elements are mostly fulfilled
- Submittable Green Flag
- Green Flag

**Green Flag**
- Create an Action Plan (school application) on ECA
- Submit application before deadline
- Achieve at least 35 points
- Program Elements have been started
- Program Elements are complete
- Submittable Green Flag
- Green Flag

**EMERGING PROGRAM**
- The EcoSchools program is in its early stages and some environmental learning and action has been demonstrated.
- Create an Action Plan (school application) on ECA
- Submit application before deadline
- Achieve 65-79 points
- Program Elements are somewhat fulfilled
- Submittable Green Flag
- Green Flag

**DEVELOPING PROGRAM**
- The EcoSchools program is in development and environmental learning and action has been demonstrated throughout the school.
- Create an Action Plan (school application) on ECA
- Submit application before deadline
- Achieve 80-99 points
- Program Elements are mostly fulfilled
- Submittable Green Flag
- Green Flag

**ACCOMPLISHED PROGRAM**
- The EcoSchools program has a strong foundation with the whole school community, and environmental learning and action is well integrated throughout the school year.
- Create an Action Plan (school application) on ECA
- Satisfactory Green Flag
- Green Flag
- Accomplished Green Flag

**OUTSTANDING PROGRAM**
- The EcoSchools program is well-established. Environmental learning and action is a defining element of school culture and extends beyond the school walls.
- Create an Action Plan (school application) on ECA
- Satisfactory Green Flag
- Green Flag
- Accomplished Green Flag

EcoSchools U.S. Certification Rubric

Please refer to the rubric below for guidance on the criteria EcoSchools U.S. uses to assess school applications (also known as your school’s Plan on the ECA).
Program Elements

NOTE: Program Elements are not relevant to the Participant level of achievement.

Action documentation: suitable documentation is uploaded to actions and campaigns went as well as celebration

Action descriptions: clear description of how actions were implemented

Data accuracy: data questions are complete, answered accurately, and allow for impact measurement

Planning: evidence of self-assessment, action planning, goal setting, etc.

Application completeness: action documentation suitable documentation is uploaded to actions

Reflection and Celebration: evidence of reflection on how actions and campaigns went as well as celebration

Outdoor learning: opportunities for students to learn outdoors and foster nature connections

Action criteria

Questions related to quantitative data (i.e., numerical values, unique to each action)

Questions related to engagement and participation (questions #1-3 in most action cards)

Questions related to communication (questions #5 in most action cards)

Questions related to the broader community (questions #6-7 in most actions)

Questions related to instructional time

Questions related to student engagement and participation from across the student body

Questions related to student leadership

Questions related to SDGs

Questions related to reflection and celebration

Questions related to extending the learning

Questions related to curriculum connections

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