

The Hidden Carbon Curriculum

Audit Checklist for Schools

This checklist helps you identify where your school's everyday operations might contradict the climate messages you're teaching. The goal is not perfection, just coherence. Use this to spot the most visible contradictions and prioritise action.



1. Energy and Buildings

Walk around your school on a cold day. What do you notice?

☐	Radiators are on full blast while windows are open
☐	Lights are left on in empty classrooms, corridors, or halls
☐	There is no clear culture of 'turn it off when you leave'
☐	Thermostats are set too high or too low — temperature wars between rooms
☐	ICT devices (computers, smartboards, printers) are left on standby overnight
☐	Heating or cooling runs through holidays when the building is empty
☐	No visible reminders or systems for energy saving (e.g. energy monitors, switch-off labels)

Ideas:

Appoint energy monitors in each class. Set a school-wide expectation: last one out turns off lights. Fix thermostat settings. Install timers on non-essential devices.

2. Food and Waste

Spend a lunchtime in the canteen. Then check the bins at the end of the day.

☐	The canteen serves highly processed, high-carbon meals with little plant-forward choice
☐	There is significant food waste and plates routinely half-full when binned
☐	Recycling bins are contaminated or not used correctly
☐	Single-use items dominate: plastic cutlery, juice cartons, individually wrapped snacks
☐	Produce is flown in or comes from distant suppliers when local options exist
☐	Portion sizes don't match appetite, leading to waste
☐	No composting or food waste reduction initiatives in place

Ideas:

Install water fountains instead of selling juice cartons. Introduce one meat-free day. Run a food waste reduction challenge. Switch to one local supplier as a trial.

3. Transport and Travel

Stand outside the school gates at 8:50am. What do you see?

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| ☐ | Car park is full of idling engines at drop-off and pick-up |
| ☐ | Pupils are routinely driven distances they could walk or cycle |
| ☐ | There is no safe, accessible bike storage |
| ☐ | Cycling is discouraged or seen as inconvenient |
| ☐ | School trips default to coaches even for short distances |
| ☐ | Staff car park is near capacity every day with little evidence of car-sharing |
| ☐ | There is no promotion of Walk to School Week or active travel initiatives |

Ideas:

Launch a no-idling campaign. Install better bike storage. Make Walk to School Week visible and celebrated. Offer walking buses or cycle trains.

4. Purchasing and Procurement

Who makes purchasing decisions? What criteria are they using?

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| ☐ | Procurement decisions are purely cost-driven — no sustainability criteria |
| ☐ | Supplies come from distant suppliers when local options are available |
| ☐ | Things are replaced rather than repaired |
| ☐ | There is no culture of 'use it up, wear it out, make it do' |
| ☐ | Cleaning products, paper, toilet paper are chosen without environmental consideration |
| ☐ | Office supplies default to single-use or non-recyclable options |
| ☐ | No one in the leadership team considers environmental impact when making purchasing decisions |

Ideas:

Include sustainability criteria in your next major procurement decision: Switch to recycled paper. Choose eco-friendly cleaning products. Make one visible change and talk about it.

5. Outdoor Spaces and Biodiversity

Look at your school grounds. What are pupils seeing when they learn about biodiversity?

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| ☐ | Grounds are ecologically barren - mostly tarmac and closely-mown grass |
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☐	There are no trees, wildflowers, hedgerows, log piles, or bird boxes
☐	Outdoor learning happens in spaces that don't reflect what's being taught
☐	There is no pond, composting area, vegetable patch, or forest school space
☐	Grounds maintenance prioritises 'tidy' over 'wildlife-friendly'
☐	Pupils have no opportunities to create or care for habitats
☐	Biodiversity lessons happen inside while the view outside contradicts the teaching

Ideas:

Let one area go wild. Plant wildflowers. Install a bug hotel. Involve pupils in creating the habitat they're learning about. Start small, one corner can make a big difference.

6. Culture and Leadership

This one is harder to audit but perhaps the most important.

☐	Leadership does not visibly model sustainable behaviour
☐	Sustainability messages are tokenistic — one assembly a year, Eco Week only
☐	Environmental impact is not considered when making decisions
☐	Pupils' ideas for climate action are dismissed as 'too difficult' or 'not a priority'
☐	Sustainability is not a standing agenda item in leadership meetings
☐	The eco-council or sustainability lead has no real power or budget
☐	There is a culture of 'someone else's job' rather than collective responsibility

Ideas:

Make sustainability a standing SLT agenda item. Empower the eco-council to audit and report back. Celebrate progress publicly. Lead by example.

Your Action Plan

You don't need to fix everything at once. Pick the three most visible contradictions — the ones pupils see every day — and commit to fixing those first.

Action Plan — Our Top 3 Contradictions to Fix
Contradiction 1:
Quick win / first step:
Who will lead this:
Contradiction 2:
Quick win / first step:
Who will lead this:
Contradiction 3:

Quick win / first step:

Who will lead this:

Next Steps

- Share this audit with your eco-council, sustainability lead, or senior leadership team
- Schedule a 'contradiction hunt' walk around the school
- Choose your top 3 priorities and assign leads
- Set a review date (e.g. half a term) to check progress
- Celebrate wins publicly, make the hidden curriculum visible

Remember

You don't need to be perfect. You just need to be coherent. When pupils see that adults care enough to align actions with teaching, climate education becomes real.

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For support with climate action planning, training, or embedding sustainability across your curriculum — visit notyetzero.com or get in touch.