

Whether it's better crayons in the classroom or cleaning up the car-pool lane, a little parental involvement can go a long way to enrich a child's learning environment.

CHANGING





By Alexandra Zissu

As the calendar barrels toward the first day of school, some environmentally aware parents will be gearing up with vinyl- and lead-free lunch boxes, chemical-free water bottles, unbleached recycled-paper notebooks and safer glue sticks. But whether this conscientious September prep is a parent's first or umpteenth, "Now is the time to think wider," says Christopher Gavigan, CEO of Healthy Child Healthy World. It's not only about your individual kids. "It's about equipping the staff, children and administration to make this a healthy school year."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELINOR CARUCCI

SCHOOLS



Teachers who understand the importance of a healthy classroom can be valuable partners in greening the rest of the school.

WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?

Having little control over the environmental hazards of a school building is frustrating, to say the least, for parents. All the more reason to fully embrace what you *can* control: lunch. When your child's only alternative is heavily processed, low-quality cafeteria fare, pack nutritious goodies in non-vinyl, lead-free lunch boxes. Thankfully, most large retailers no longer sell vinyl lunch boxes because of the numerous recalls of lead-tainted vinyl products last year.

A few stylin' and safe totes: ***EcoBags** recycled cotton canvas lunch bag (\$6; ecobags.com)

***BuiltNY Munchlers** animal-shaped, lead-free lunch boxes that fold out into placemats (\$10; builtny.com)

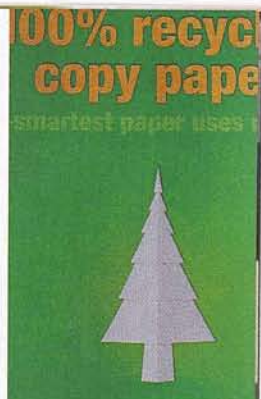
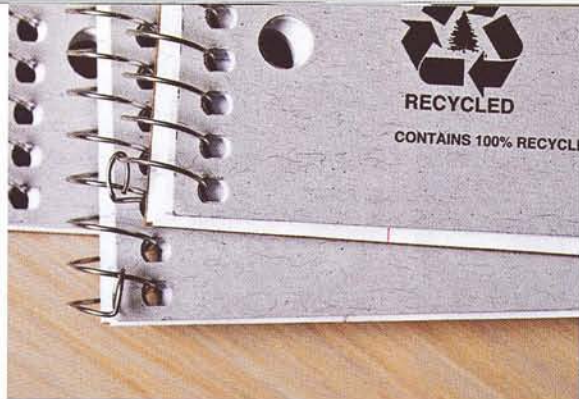
***To-Go Ware** stainless steel food carrier (\$15.95; greenfeet.com)

***For a wide selection of lead-free kids' lunch bags from plain to patterned, insulated and not, visit reusablebags.com.**

Green the Classroom

Your kid may have the “good” notebooks, but what's the entire class using for construction paper, crayons, paint, markers and more? Teachers buy many of their own supplies these days, so see if they're willing to invest in safer, less-toxic versions (if your teacher is on a tight budget, organize a group of parents to chip in). Fortunately, office supply stores now carry a wide array of green products for bulk purchasing, and some may even give

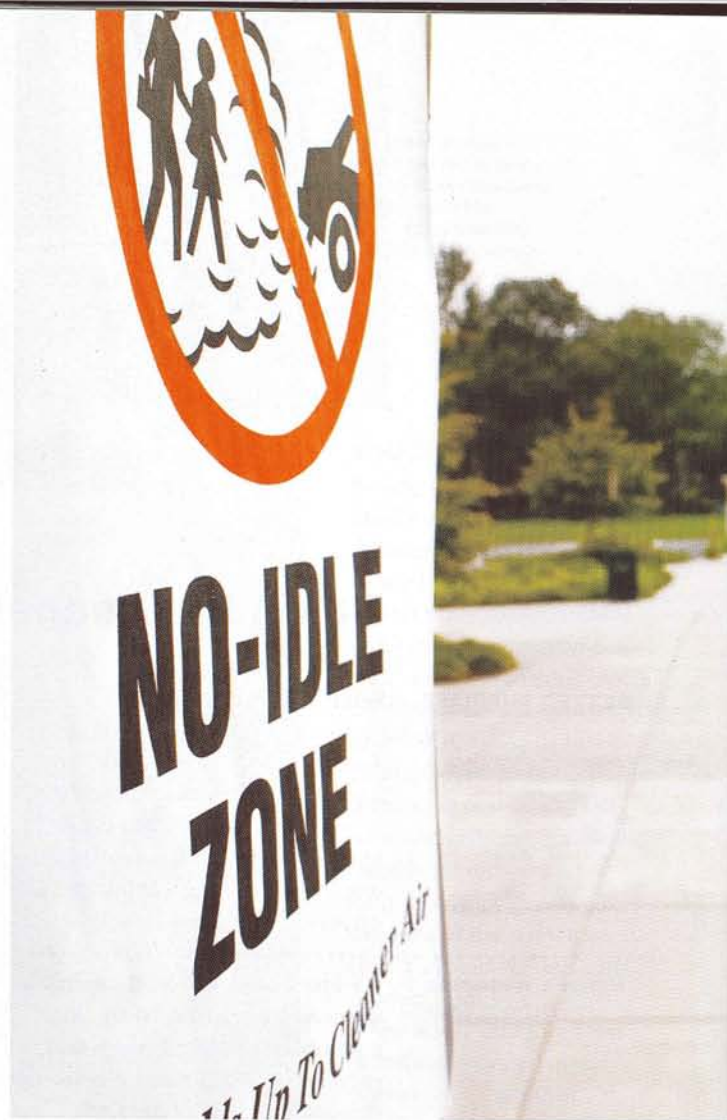
educators a discount. Steer teachers toward low-odor dry erase markers, “no dust” chalk and recycled-content construction paper. (For a shopping list, see our Guide to Greener School Supplies, right.) By starting small—one classroom at a time—moms and dads might just wind up with the teacher-comrade they need to help change the administration's views on bigger ticket issues like pesticides and cleaners.



Guide to Greener School Supplies

BETTER SUPPLIES	WHY THEY'RE GREEN	PRICE	WHERE TO BUY THEM
AusPen Dry Erase Markers	AusPen inks don't contain xylene, a volatile organic compound (VOC) in many markers that can cause headaches. They're also refillable; one .75-ounce bottle of ink contains 40 refills.	\$69.95/6 pens and 6 refill bottles (the equivalent of 240 markers)	ecosmartworld.com
Elmer's Washable School Glue	A water-based, low-VOC alternative to solvent-based modeling glues and rubber cement; Elmer's also recycles glue sticks and glue bottles through its Elmer's Glue Crew classroom recycling program.	about \$2 per stick	Office supply stores; for more information on the classroom recycling program, see elmersgluecrew.com
Pentel Recycology Pens, Mechanical Pencils and Highlighters	Refillable products made from 50 percent or more post-consumer recycled plastic	\$1.65-\$3	Office supply stores or pentel.com
Prang Soybean Crayons	Made from renewable soybean wax, not the petroleum-based paraffin wax used in most crayons	\$7.29/200-count box	dixonusa.com or staples.com
Riverside Greenwood Construction Paper	Made with 100 percent recycled paper	\$1.39/50 sheets	officedepot.com
Staples 1-Subject Notebooks	Made with 100 percent recycled paper (30 percent post-consumer waste)	\$4.29/pack of 3	Staples stores or staples.com
Ampad EnviroTech 100 Percent Recycled Filler Paper	Made with 100 percent post-consumer recycled paper	\$6.49/100 sheets	staples.com only (not sold in stores)

For a more complete list, see our Back to School page at thegreenguide.com.



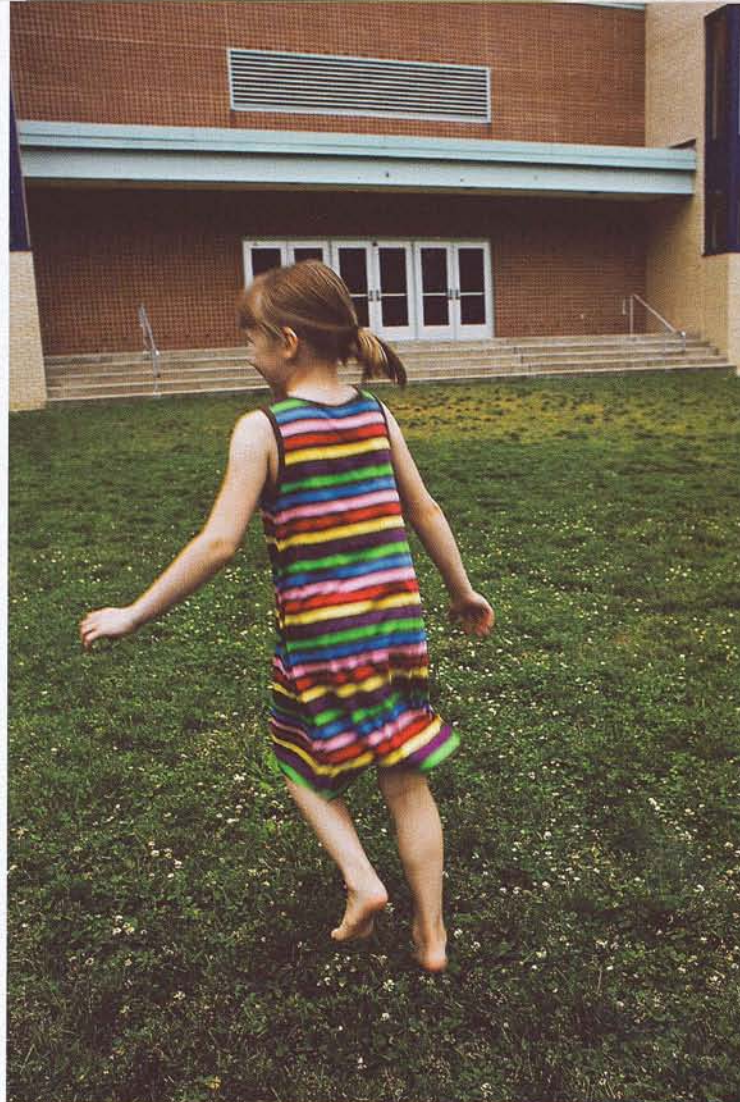
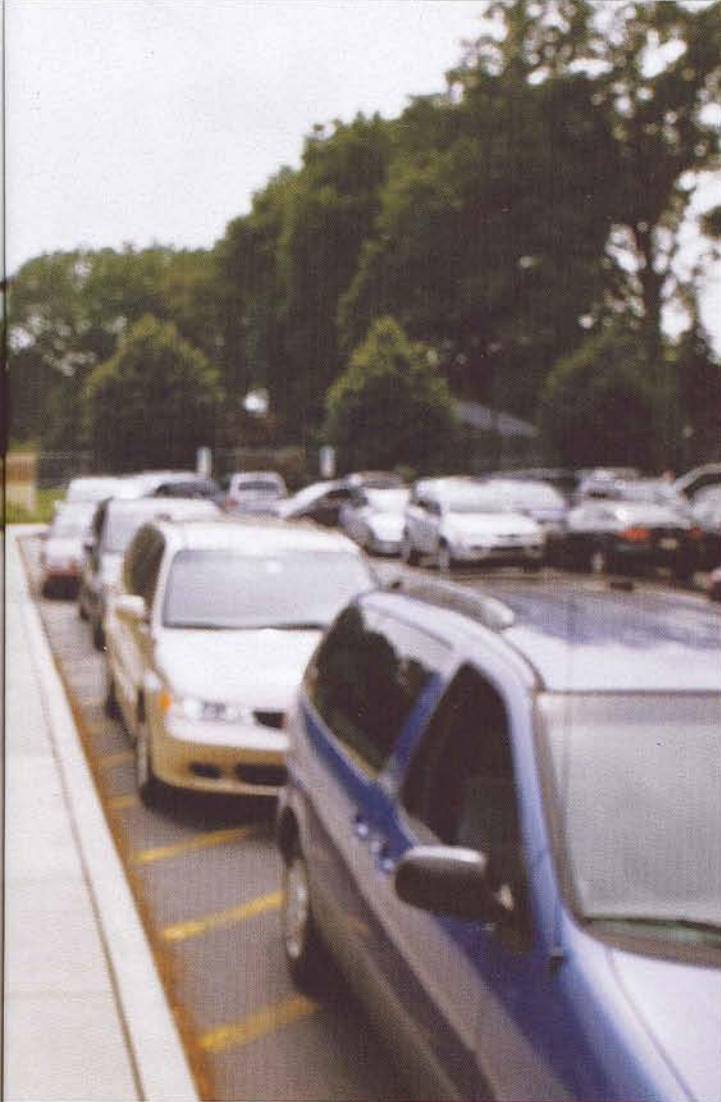
Clean the Indoor Air

Improving the indoor environment will go a long way toward helping a child's health and his ability to learn. Once the classroom is outfitted with safer supplies, tackle cleaning products, but don't expect the school to go all-natural. "Cleaning a house with baking soda and white vinegar is great, but that's not how you clean a school building," says Claire L. Barnett, executive director of the Healthy Schools Network, Inc. Many states now require green cleaners in schools; visit healthyschools.org to see if your state does. If they aren't required, ask to see your school's cleaners and look for third-party environmental certifications, namely Green Seal (greenseal.org) or EcoLogo (ecologo.ca). If your school isn't using certified products, have its vendor come and show its greenest substitute. Every vendor now has eco products, says Barnett. She's also found that school purchasers are more open to green items from longtime suppliers, rather than gifts from well-meaning parents. Their vendor will allow them to test a product's efficacy and to phase things in on their own time line.

Create a Lung-Friendly Car-Pool Lane

With the indoor air considerably cleaner, parents can turn their attention to pollution outside the school. Asking fellow parents to stop idling their cars doesn't require permission from the school's administration and is a no-brainer. It's not only a waste of gas, but vehicle exhaust is a huge source of smog emissions and particulate pollution. Turn off the car, or put it on standby mode to charge cell phones and listen to the radio, suggests Healthy Child's Gavigan.

Also request that buses not be allowed to idle, since many still run on polluting diesel. You may need to enlist the help of other parents and the PTA for this one. Download letters to parents, teachers and principals, as well as the "No-Idle Zone" sign pictured above at airwatchnorthwest.org/anti-idling.htm. And try to get all kids to walk or bike; organize a walk- or bike-to-school day to inspire them (walktoschool.org).



Urging a school administration to stop bus idling and to switch to green cleaners and less-toxic pesticides can seem daunting to a parent working alone. Enlist the support of your school's Parent Teacher Association (pta.org). You'll have far greater success when everyone is advocating for the same change.

Eliminate Pests

Because synthetic pesticides are frequently used in schools, switching to less-toxic alternatives is a great way to keep growing bodies and brains healthy. Pesticides are sprayed outside on lawns and inside for bugs and rodents, often with no warning, and the neurotoxic chemicals in these products have been linked to cancer and asthma in children. Those sprayed outside get tracked inside on students' shoes, exposing kids for days or weeks after application, says Jonathan Kaplan, a senior policy specialist at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

There are no comprehensive federal regulations governing pesticide use in schools, but moms and dads can check city and state laws to make sure their school at least complies with local rules (many states now have pesticide restrictions). Parents should insist on receiving a spraying schedule and a list of pesticides used. "In California, for example, all of that data is required to be maintained by public schools and available to the public on request," Kaplan says. To change the way schools deal with pests, ask

probing questions about your school's pest management plans and urge the school to hire third-party-certified integrated pest management (IPM) companies, which replace chemical pesticides with control methods like sealing points of entry, caulking cracks in the walls and maintaining lawns to reduce pests. Third-party-certification agencies include Green Shield (greenshieldcertified.org) and IPM Star (ipminstitute.org/ipmstar.htm).

It might feel strange to advocate for so much, but it's no less than many parents have already done in their homes. Moms and dads willing to make pains of themselves will see results for many more children than their own.

RESOURCES FOR GREEN SCHOOL ACTIVISTS

HealthySchools.org
HealthyChild.com
MyHealthySchool.com