

## Green School Supplies Eco-Savvy Shopping Just Got Easier

by Betsy S. Franz



With all the other things that parents have to worry about when getting kids ready to go back to school, we might be tempted to think that our choices of school supplies don't matter much. But the National Retail Federation estimates that Americans bought more than \$20 billion in back-to-school supplies last year. That's a lot of paper, pencils and backpacks, which makes a significant impact on the environment.

**T**hat's why shoppers' demand for green products has caught the attention of local retailers. Products that once were obtainable only through specialty stores are now carried by some major nationwide office supply stores. This makes it easier for eco-conscious parents to avoid compromising their values with back-to-school purchases.

Today's eco-conscious kids will love it, because they know the score. Here are some things to keep in mind.

### Paper

The two prime environmental culprits in school supply materials are paper and plastic. The Worldwatch Institute reports that nearly 42 percent of the trees harvested in the world are used to make paper, often eliminating critical wildlife habitats in the process.

Recycled paper is now a readily available option. It preserves forests, reduces pollution from processing and reduces solid waste in landfills. The Environmental Protection Agency recommends buying paper with a minimum of 30 percent post-consumer content, but many office supply stores now carry a wide selection of 100 percent recycled paper prod-

ucts. A PCW symbol on the label indicates the paper is truly made from post-consumer waste and not just wood chips and mill scraps. Buying 100 percent PCW paper is a way of closing the loop of the recycling process.

Some fun, tree-free papers are now made from alternative fibers such as grasses, banana stalks, sugar cane, bamboo, seaweed and cotton. Because these alternatives cost more than everyday papers, they make a better choice for stationery and personalized note cards.

### Pens & Pencils

Pencils are now available in either recycled or FSC-certified wood. Forest Stewardship Council certification provides independent proof that the wood comes from a forest managed according to the most stringent practices for environmental responsibility, social benefit and long-term economic viability. Other environmentally friendly options for pencils include those made from recycled tires, T-shirts, newspaper or money.

Refillable pens and mechanical pencils are another option. Some are made from used car headlights, CDs and plastic shopping bags. It's better to refill than landfill.

## Notebooks & Binders

Plastic is used in the manufacture of many school supplies, including notebooks, binders, lunchboxes, pencil boxes, rulers, plastic-coated paperclips and scissors. Many of these items incorporate PVC plastic. From its manufacture to disposal, PVC emits toxic compounds.

More than 20 million tons of plastic end up in our landfills each year, where scientists estimate that it will take hundreds of years to degrade. The University of Missouri reports that new biodegradable plastics are being developed, although they're not yet on the market.

Binders are now available that are made from cardboard and 100 percent recycled chipboard. After use, the binder cover and rings can be separated and recycled.

## Backpacks

Better backpacks are made from natural fiber or nylon, rather than PVC. Soft-sided fabric lunch packs are a good alternative to plastic. For other items, such as scissors, rulers and paper clips,

choose items made from recycled plastic or metals.

The Center for Health, Environment & Justice has a *Back-To-School PVC-Free School Supply Guide* available on request by emailing them at [chej@chej.org](mailto:chej@chej.org), specifying the item in the subject line. Or, download a copy of the guide at [TakeCareOfYourShare.com/pvcfree4school.pdf](http://TakeCareOfYourShare.com/pvcfree4school.pdf).

## Easy Access

For eco-shopping convenience, most of the major office supply stores have done the homework for us, by creating their own line of environmentally safer products.

Staples, for example, lists nearly 3,000 products in its EcoEasy line; OfficeMax has some 1,700 environmentally preferred products; and Office Depot offers a new Buy Green storefront area, displaying products of "various shades of green." Most school supplies, including recycled and sugar cane-based paper, recyclable binders and pens, pencils and even bulletin boards, made from recycled materials,

will be available locally from one or more of these outlets. If these stores are too far out of the way for a fuel-efficient trip, calling first or shopping their online catalogs may help save fuel costs. However, remember to recycle all extra packaging that mail order produces.

Remember that the three Rs for going back to school start at home, as we reduce our current spending by reusing and recycling what we already have on hand. Children can make a game out of hunting down and collecting usable pens and pencils lying around the house. Get creative by dressing up an old, hand-me-down backpack for this year's student, and add to the fun by having children swap their newly redecorated backpack with that of a close friend.

Moving children away from a throwaway mindset may be one of the most valuable environmental lessons you can teach them.

*Betsy Franz, a freelance writer in Melbourne, FL, specializes in environmental topics. Learn more at [NaturesDetails.net](http://NaturesDetails.net).*