

School Strike for Climate

A reflection for teachers - Foreword by Christian Aid's Schools Manager

We live in extraordinary times.

Later this month, young people across the world will be walking out of school. They will be gathering in the centres of our towns and cities. They will be marching, singing, shouting. They will be staging sit-downs in the streets, making speeches, leading chants. The placards they brandish will articulate wit, cynicism, anger and pain.

They will be pleading with adults to take climate change seriously. Many will express a recognition of the crisis that reaches far beyond the average grown-up's comprehension of the situation. A few of them might be there because a day off school sounds nice. But the vast majority will be there because they are scared, fed up, angry and disillusioned with the global response to the existential threat posed by climate change.

The youth strike movement that has swept the globe was inspired by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. A teenage girl with Asperger's who just a few short years ago 'didn't speak to anyone and had no friends' is perhaps an unlikely figurehead for a global mass movement. But Thunberg has achieved what few figures throughout history have managed to do, sparking a mass movement that cuts right through political discourse and decades-long inertia to articulate a brutal truth that now rings through the streets and right into the halls of power: 'why should we be studying for a future that soon will be no more, when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future?'

I have had the privilege of attending the rallies on strike days and witnessing the combined might of the young people she has inspired. I will confess that the sight of thousands of girls and boys singing together in the street has moved me to tears. The strikes are a phenomenon; the outpouring of grief, frustration and hope a force to be reckoned with. These young people know that the very future of the planet on which they live is at stake. Like Greta, they believe that 'we can't save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed'. It's not an easy message for schools – or politicians - to hear. But these young people have already shaped the discourse. They have already changed the hearts and minds of decision-makers. They are hope, manifest. We talk about change-makers and future leaders, pupil participation and care for creation ... here it is, happening, up close and in real life. This presents a difficult conundrum for teachers, many of whom share the concerns of young people about the threat the climate crisis poses to the planet, but who, in their professional roles, will be unable to directly support or condone the action they are taking to walk out of school. Many schools, however, will want to explore the issues around climate justice which have been brought into sharp focus through the action of young people.

This assembly plan offers an opportunity to explore the issues around climate justice within school, to acknowledge the power of our young people, and to listen seriously to their voices and let them know that they are heard and that adults are listening. It will also offer an opportunity to gently introduce those young people who do not know much about environmental issues to some of the questions raised by the strikes. Whilst some young people are 'leading the charge' out on the streets, others will be relatively unaware of it, or of the growing crescendo of concern that has triggered it. We hope that you find a moment on September 20, or on future dates, when young people are striking from school, to reflect on the issues highlighted by their actions. We understand that it is a difficult challenge for teachers. We are offering a balanced range of materials and ideas to help you to give your pupils an opportunity to engage within school.

A note on safeguarding

Above all, it is important that the health and wellbeing of young people is looked after. Christian Aid is clear that when children and young people strike from school, it is best done in dialogue with parents and teachers, and that safeguarding should remain a top priority. We note that the strikes are genuinely grassroots movements organised by young people and as such are not risk-assessed in the way that many public events are. We also recognise the considerable risk this topic poses to mental health and wellbeing, with eco-anxiety becoming an increasing concern. All of the school materials that Christian Aid produces on this topic balance the recognition of serious concerns around the environment with more hopeful messaging about positive action that is being taken. Please do bear in mind the potential for anxiety when discussing these issues with young people.

Assembly plan

Here are some ideas for exploring climate justice in school. Select whichever feels most appropriate to your context and feel free to adapt.

Download our Fumes or Futures assemblies

Our Fumes or Futures assemblies offer a brilliant introduction to the topic of climate change. We recommend that you download these first and use the material to plan your assembly on strike day:

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/schools/fumes-or-futures>

Show our School Strikes film

In addition, we have made a special film about the school strike movement:

[Christian Aid school strikes film](https://youtu.be/yA_6XbabzVE) (https://youtu.be/yA_6XbabzVE)

Allow space for the pupils to talk and explore their feelings

- Talk about the context in your school: are lots of people absent due to strike, or do you live in an area where no one has really engaged in this action?
- Ask the pupils what they think about climate change. Allow time and space for pupils to talk about their feelings. You could include some mood boards to help draw out feelings or work together on a collage about nature or go for a 'walk and talk' somewhere outside.
- If pupils express anxiety or despondency, listen to them, but point out all the things that are being done to tackle the problem. You could highlight the fact that the Government has recently passed a law to make sure that the UK is carbon neutral by 2050 (and in Scotland by 2045). Look into what this means and the exciting changes that will happen in the coming years as the UK significantly reduces its carbon emissions. Can they spot any changes already happening in the community (e.g. solar panels, electric cars/buses). Can you find out what plans the local authority has for your area and share these with children?
- What do they think about the action that some young people are taking when they strike? Talk about your school's policy with regard to the strikes (some schools have endorsed them and allowed pupils time off, whilst others think that pupils can do more to help the planet by being in school and getting the knowledge and skills they need to change the world).
- Ask pupils what other actions they can take to help the planet – and explore the fact that it is not their responsibility alone and that adults everywhere are working on this problem.
- Explain what the school is doing. And what the local authority is doing. Explain that adults are listening hard to what young people are saying.
- Allow time and space for prayer and reflection. There are prayers in the Fumes or Futures assembly, and also a special strike prayer below.

Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for Creation: the gift of this extraordinary world.

Our planet of forests and mountains and oceans and animals. Of rainbows and meadows and harvests and streams.

Unique and astounding, our swirling blue sphere in the vast emptiness of space.

We put before you the sadness that many of us feel about the harm that has been done to it. But also, here is our hope. We pray that now we will start to recognise the value of this gift and to care for it as it should always have been cared for.

Sacred, Beautiful, Precious, Fragile Earth.

Amen.

Reflection

Here is a reflection for schools where prayer will not be appropriate:

Ask pupils to close their eyes and imagine that they are approaching Planet Earth in a rocket from outer space. They are soaring through the stars towards a little blue speck in the distance. They are getting closer now and that speck is getting bigger. As they get closer, they can begin to see the patches of brown and green land picked out against the great blue oceans. Cloud formations swirl around the planet, and there at the top and bottom are the white caps of the north and south poles. Ask pupils to stall their rockets and take in the sight. Maybe they have travelled for many years through space. They will have passed stars and comets and black holes. But they won't have passed anything quite as special as this place. It is the only known place in the universe to hold life. And what life! Our beautiful earth is teeming with insects and fish, mammals and reptiles, amphibians and birds. It is a place of wonder. Ask them now to zoom right into where your school is located. And then right in, to where they are sitting, with their eyes closed. Ask them to feel themselves centred on the ground, right here, on our beautiful world. Then ask them to slowly open their eyes and smile at the person next to them. Together, today, all over the world, people are working hard to help look after our wonderful world.

RE

In RE, explore the concept of stewardship.

Christians believe that humans are called to be stewards of the Earth's resources. In Genesis, the story of God's covenant with Noah emphasises that God makes his promise and covenant relationship with people and all living creatures [Genesis 9] - emphasising the importance of all of creation to God.

You can explore how many different faiths prioritise care for the Environment.

Action

Could you plant a tree for the planet in the school grounds?

Trees are rich in symbolism, and a key tool in the fight against climate change. A ceremony to plant a tree for the planet in your school grounds can be a powerful symbolic action.

Could children write letters to the local MP /MSP?

It can be really empowering to make contact with your representative in Parliament and to find out what they are doing about climate change – and ask them to do more. Children do not need to be experts in the issues, they just need to be able to express why they care about the planet. Help pupils to understand who their MP is, what their job involves, and how they are elected. You could invite your MP into school for a tree-planting ceremony,

Could keen pupils form a climate action group?

It is important that pupils don't feel like it is their responsibility to fix the climate crisis and that they understand that around the world, adults are working hard on this. But also, every action helps and it can be empowering to take some action within your sphere of influence.

Could you switch the school energy supply to a renewable tariff?

Switching to a renewable energy supplier is one of the most significant actions any individual or organisation can take. Although an 100% renewable tariff may not always be the very cheapest, many are now competitive with standard rates, and arguably the 'best value', especially if one bears in mind that best value does not always mean cheapest! Could the climate action group make this case to the school leadership team and work with them to advocate for a cleaner energy supply?

Here are some inspiring ideas about actions some other schools have taken to help the environment:

- Banned plastic bottles and installed new water fountains
- Campaigned to remove beef from school menus
- Led walk-to-school campaigns and designed posters to stop people idling their engines
- Installed solar panels and/or biomass boilers
- Planted trees or wildflower areas for pollinators
- Written to David Attenborough and the Chancellor of the Exchequer