

Plastics Companies Are Writing Lesson Plans. What Could Go Wrong?

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This story originally appeared on [Grist](#) and is part of the [Climate Desk](#) collaboration.

This fall, 54 million K-12 students are headed back to [the classroom](#) for another year of lessons in all the classic subjects: math, English, history, biology. But there's another subject that's been sneaking into school curricula: plastics.

A [new report](#) from the nonprofit Plastic Pollution Coalition documents the many ways the plastics industry has been inserting its agenda into classrooms across the US—including through lesson plans and worksheets, hands-on science experiments, and a program called “PlastiVan” that travels from city to city teaching students about “[the contribution plastics make to modern life](#).”

Industry interests offer these resources to teachers for free or for cheap, according to the report. The materials tend to highlight the necessity of plastics while downplaying their significant downsides to [human health](#) and the [environment](#).

“When that information is provided to kids, it obfuscates the true impacts of plastic pollution,” said Madison Dennis, senior policy and advocacy manager for Plastic Pollution Coalition and one of the report's main authors. Besides harming marine life, plastics can expose people to hazardous chemicals, clog storm drains and contribute to flooding, and release planet-warming greenhouse gases. The Plastic Pollution Coalition is calling for stricter school policies against the use of industry-sponsored learning materials.

The report lays out four case studies of plastics industry “propaganda” for schoolkids. One involves the Society of Plastics Engineers, or SPE, a trade group that recently became a division of the Plastics Industry Association. SPE's [lesson plans](#) include activities like a “plastic scavenger hunt,” which aims for students to “understand that plastics are ubiquitous and their importance to society and their personal life.” A video titled “Your Bottle Means Jobs” explains how plastics recycling supports local employment.

Another case study highlights the American Association of Chemistry Teachers, an initiative of the Dow Chemical Company. One of the association's lesson plans teaches elementary and middle school students how to compare the strength of various types of plastic bags that can be found in a grocery store. After a brief experiment, the lesson invites them to “pretend [they] are an employee for Dow Chemical Company” and are designing a plastic bag for a customer.

While many of the materials claim to support STEM learning objectives, they do so while promoting familiar industry talking points, emphasizing the affordability and safety of plastics. Some acknowledge plastic pollution as a serious problem, but they blame irresponsible consumer behaviors and, instead of recommending less plastic be produced, propose more recycling as the primary way to address it.

In reality, only 9 percent of all plastics are recycled worldwide, and scientists have repeatedly warned that recycling will be unable to keep up with projected growth in plastic production. [Investigative reporting](#) has shown that industry groups knew this decades ago, but promoted recycling anyway in order to defuse growing concern over plastic pollution.

Wendy Johnson, a science education specialist at the National Center for Science Education, said the industry's lesson plans and worksheets don't reflect good pedagogy. Materials claiming to be aligned with

state-level STEM standards don't say which standards they support, or how they're aligned. Lesson plans instruct students to read teachers' notes, or list industry-specific vocab terms like "stretch blow molding" or "thermosetting."

"By using all of these technical terms, it's tricking people into thinking ... that they're doing science," Johnson told *Grist*. What the materials really teach, she said, is "ideological perspectives about the economy," like the desirability of cheap consumer goods.