

'Twilight Zone' school fights against waste

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"You know the rules," principal Josie Vescio says to a small student in the playground. "I shouldn't be seeing rubbish in your hands."

In fact, at St Rose Catholic Primary School, plastic wrap or empty chip packets are not to be seen at all. Rubbish has been banned and the bins hidden behind a brick pillar. Soap was banned, too, from children's bathrooms at the Collaroy Plateau school until complaints from parents.

"I don't think the kids cared," Vescio says. "Unless you are washing your hands for a good number of minutes, which kids never do, you might as well not have soap."

We are all on a journey, the principal says. And her path has taken this small school to some unorthodox places. Some parents have dubbed it "the Twilight Zone" and moved their children elsewhere. Vescio prefers to call herself "an enabler".

"A principal has a very powerful position in a school," she says. "What happens here can only happen because I give it air time, give it space, give it energy."

Last year, she removed liquid soap from students' toilets, citing "health and safety" concerns after children used it to make the floors slippery. Some parents backed the ban.

"Everybody wants their children to have good hygiene but they don't really need soap ... if they wash their hands properly," P&F member Jeannie McDonnell says.

"If it's an issue, put a little disinfectant in their bag and let them use that instead."

Other parents complained about an alleged spread of hand, foot and mouth disease. Some children had also stopped using soap at home, says one parent, who declined to be named. Soap was brought back at school a few months later, albeit in less messy "foam dispensers".

This year, Vescio is busy enabling her 230 students to become "stewards of the earth". Children have been instructed to cut back on plastic wrap and to take any remaining rubbish home with them. Vescio says bins have been removed or placed in "obscure places". The school's rubbish collection has more than halved as a result.

She takes Fairfax Media on a tour of the school grounds: past the three flourishing "green walls", the compost bins outside classrooms, the playgrounds only littered with leaves.

Vescio says students who drop rubbish are given "re-teaching".

She stops to pick up an empty popcorn bag from the ground by the front gate.

"If it's a clean school, you feel better about learning," she says.

Each student has been given a special, ventilated lunch box for storing food without plastic wrap, as part of a plan to minimise waste. Notes home to parents are sent by email rather than paper. Teachers have been told to reduce photocopying.

"It's all about being global citizens and making sure we do the right thing," Vescio says.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/twilight-zone-school-fights-against-waste-20140308-34e1f.htm>