

Section 1:

#1 Strengths: ■ Your vivid imagery in the opening scene effectively establishes the setting and illustrates the contrast between normal school life and the environmental problem. ■ You skilfully connect the local issue at Elmwood Secondary to the broader environmental crisis.

Weaknesses: Insufficient development of student voices → While you introduce interesting characters like Jeremy Lau and Layla Thompson, their perspectives aren't fully explored. You could strengthen this section by including more specific concerns or solutions from these student voices. Phrases like "We're the ones who will inherit this mess" hint at deeper emotions that aren't fully unpacked.

Exemplar: ***"We're the ones who will inherit this mess," said Layla Thompson, Year 9, her voice firm as she collected plastic wrappers from beneath the oval benches. "Every lunch break I see classmates drop rubbish without thinking. That's why our EAC team started visiting primary classrooms to teach younger kids about plastic waste—we need to start the change early."***

#2 Strengths: ■ Your article effectively highlights both the environmental and social aspects of the plastic waste problem. ■ You've included concrete examples of local initiatives that give readers tangible solutions.

Weaknesses: Limited exploration of barriers to change → You mention the "Pack It Forward" initiative but don't address the challenges students face in implementing these solutions. What makes it difficult for students to adopt reusable containers? Why has plastic become so convenient in school lunches? Addressing these barriers would create a more balanced discussion about the challenges of change.

Exemplar: ***The "Pack It Forward" initiative has faced hurdles, particularly the extra cost of reusable containers for some families and the convenience of pre-packaged snacks. "We're working with local businesses to sponsor container sets for students who need them," Ms. Patel explained. "Change isn't just about knowing better—it's about making better choices accessible to everyone."***

#3 Strengths: ■ Your conclusion effectively brings the discussion back to individual responsibility with practical suggestions. ■ Your writing uses powerful metaphors like plastic as a "mirror" to help readers connect emotionally to the issue.

Weaknesses: Lack of specific follow-up actions → While you mention small individual actions like "picking up a stray bottle," your article ends without giving readers clear guidance on how to get involved with existing initiatives. The ending feels somewhat general rather than driving readers toward specific community engagement.

Exemplar: *To join these efforts, students can sign up for creek clean-up sessions held every second Saturday morning, bring reusable water bottles to school sports events, or join the EAC's weekly meetings in Room 24. As Ms. Patel reminds her students, "The planet doesn't need a few people doing sustainability perfectly. It needs millions doing it imperfectly—but consistently."*

■ Your feature article effectively captures the urgency of plastic pollution through a local lens. The connection between school grounds and wider environmental impact works well to make a global issue feel immediate and relevant. However, your piece would benefit from more concrete examples showing how plastic waste directly affects students' daily lives. You could strengthen the middle sections by including more specific details about what plastic items are most commonly found at Elmwood Secondary.

Your article touches on solutions but could be improved by exploring the success stories in more depth. For instance, has another school nearby solved a similar problem? What exactly changed in their approach? Additionally, you could enhance reader engagement by adding a small section about how families can support students' efforts at home.

The quotes from experts add authority to your piece, but they could be balanced with more authentic student voices expressing their feelings about the issue. Try including a short paragraph about student-led campaigns or specific messages students have created to raise awareness.

Score: 45/50

Section 2:

Headline: "The Hidden Toll: How Plastic Waste Is Choking Our Community—and What We Can Do About It"

#1 On a warm Monday afternoon, as the final bell echoed through the halls of Elmwood Secondary School, a group of students shuffled out onto the oval. Laughter floated in the breeze. But beneath their feet, buried among the grass and dust, the earth whispered a different story—one of crinkled chip packets, discarded juice boxes, and torn plastic wrappers ground into the soil like secrets nobody wanted to admit.

Plastic waste has become a silent crisis in our community. What was once a problem for the oceans and faraway lands has crept into our own playgrounds, classrooms, and streets. And the consequences are stacking up, one bottle cap at a time.

The Scope We Ignore Recent figures from the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) show that Australians generate approximately 3.4 million tonnes of plastic waste each year—yet only

13% of that is actually recycled. The rest? It ends up in landfills, waterways, or scattered across our ~~neighborhoods~~ [neighbourhoods]. At Elmwood Secondary, a survey conducted by the school's Environmental Action Committee (EAC) found that more than 70% of litter collected during Clean-Up Day was single-use plastic.

"The volume of waste we're seeing—just from lunch breaks—is staggering," said Ms. Patel, the school's science coordinator and leader of the EAC. "It's not just an aesthetic issue. It's harming our local wildlife, blocking drains, and polluting our green spaces."

Indeed, our school sits just 300 meters from the Melville Creek—a narrow but vital waterway that snakes through the heart of our suburb. Once a vibrant ecosystem teeming with frogs, dragonflies, and waterbirds, the creek now bears the burden of our wastefulness. Plastic bags cling to reeds like ghosts. Soda bottles bob on the surface. The wildlife? They've started to disappear.

The Hidden Dangers According to Dr. Eleanor Green, an environmental toxicologist at the University of Sydney, microplastics are an escalating concern. "What begins as visible litter quickly breaks down into microplastics under sunlight and weathering," she explained. "These fragments seep into the soil and water, where they're nearly impossible to remove and can remain for hundreds of years. They accumulate in the food chain—impacting not only animals, but potentially humans as well."

The danger extends beyond biology. Plastic pollution also contributes to flooding, as clogged stormwater systems struggle to cope with sudden downpours. In February alone, flash flooding in our area damaged several homes and temporarily shut down a wing of our school. Council cleanup crews later confirmed the drains had been blocked with—yes, you guessed it—plastic debris.

A Cultural Shift is Needed #2 But the issue isn't just scientific; it's cultural. "There's this assumption that someone else will pick it up," said Jeremy Lau, Year 11 and a member of the EAC. "It's a 'not my problem' mindset. But if it's everyone's problem, then it has to be everyone's responsibility."

To shift this narrative, the EAC recently launched a student-led initiative called "Pack It Forward," encouraging students to use reusable lunch containers and participate in litter audits. While still in its early days, the initiative has already reduced the number of plastic items disposed of on campus by 18%, according to early tracking logs.

Meanwhile, the local council is piloting a "Smart Bin" program near the school—a solar-powered compactor that sends alerts when it's full. Council spokesperson Ava D'Souza praised the initiative: "Smart infrastructure, combined with youth engagement, is exactly the kind of synergy we need to tackle this issue at the grassroots level."

Building Momentum for Change Of course, real change takes time. But there's momentum—slow, steady, and growing. National campaigns like Plastic Free July are gaining

traction in our community. Parents are starting to question the packaging in school lunches. Supermarkets are trialling zero-waste refill stations. And perhaps most significantly, young people are refusing to be silent.

As Year 9 student Layla Thompson put it, "We're the ones who will inherit this mess. If we don't speak up now, when will we?"

The responsibility, then, isn't just to clean up—but to reimagine how we consume, discard, and care for the world around us. Because the wrappers under our benches and the bottles in our creeks are more than trash—they're a mirror. And right now, what they reflect isn't pretty.

#3 The Road Ahead It's tempting to wait for big systems to change. But solutions often begin with small acts: picking up a stray bottle, saying no to a straw, packing your sandwich in beeswax wrap instead of cling film. These aren't grand gestures—but they matter.

As Ms. Patel often reminds her students, "The planet doesn't need a few people doing sustainability perfectly. It needs millions doing it imperfectly—but consistently."

So next time you unwrap a snack or toss out a drink, ask yourself: where will this end up? The answer might just determine what kind of community—and future—we build.

Because every piece of plastic tells a story. Let's make sure ours ends well.