

Make Climate Action Local and Real

High School Track (Grades 9–12) | AI for Good in Your World

What You're Building

An AI-powered tool that helps a school, community group, or local organization understand their environmental impact and take practical, measurable action.

Build window: June 14–21, 2026 | Teams: 2–5 students | Format: Fully virtual, global

The Problem

Young people care deeply about the environment — but climate action often feels **too global, too abstract, or too overwhelming** to act on locally. Schools and communities want to reduce waste and improve sustainability, but they lack tools that make environmental impact **visible, measurable, and actionable** at the local level. Without that visibility, good intentions rarely turn into consistent change.

Your Mission

Build an AI-powered MVP that helps a school, community group, or local organization understand their environmental impact and take practical action. Choose ONE direction below:

Direction A: Food Waste Rescue Radar

Predict where food waste is likely to happen and suggest practical ways to reduce, redistribute, or better manage it.

- Identify patterns that lead to waste
- Predict when waste is likely to occur
- Suggest realistic, actionable interventions
- **Examples:** School cafeterias, events, grocery/donation programs, over-ordering patterns, leftover redistribution opportunities

Direction B: My School's Hidden Footprint

Help a school understand and visualize how everyday choices contribute to environmental impact.

- Make environmental impact visible and understandable
- Show how specific behaviors affect outcomes
- Help users prioritize the actions with the highest impact
- **Examples:** Energy use, water use, trash and recycling patterns, transportation habits, food consumption

Who You're Building For

Your user: a student leader, eco-club member, teacher, school operations staff, or community volunteer trying to make sustainability practical and visible.

Guiding question: How might we use AI to help schools and communities see their environmental impact and take realistic actions that people will actually stick with?

What a Strong Solution Looks Like

- Focuses on a **specific, local context** — not global-only solutions
- Makes environmental impact **visible and understandable**
- Uses AI to **identify patterns, make predictions, or surface insights**
- Helps users take **clear, realistic actions** — not just raises awareness
- Shows a clear flow: input → AI → insight → action
- Includes at least one **responsible AI safeguard**

⚠ Common Mistakes — Judges will mark down:

- Awareness-only tools: if your solution just shows data without AI-driven insight or suggested action, it's incomplete
- 'Data visualization' is not AI — your solution needs a reasoning layer: pattern detection, prediction, or recommendation
- Global-only framing: ground your solution in a real local setting (a specific school, a specific cafeteria)

Data & Technical Approach

You may use:

- Public environmental and climate datasets
- School-generated or sample inputs
- Open calculators or estimation tools
- **Synthetic datasets** — mock cafeteria usage, transport patterns, energy data (you don't need real data)

⊖ Avoid: overly complex data requirements, or systems that require private school data to function.

Responsible AI Requirements

1. One Realistic Risk — e.g. inaccurate estimates, misleading conclusions, over-simplification
2. One Concrete Mitigation — e.g. showing assumptions transparently, confidence ranges, user input validation
3. Human-in-the-Loop — identify one decision your AI does NOT make, and explain why a human should remain in control

AI Capabilities You May Use

- Pattern detection — identifying waste or usage trends
- Predictive modeling — forecasting usage or waste before it happens
- Recommendation systems — suggesting which actions have the highest impact
- Anomaly detection — flagging unusual consumption spikes
- Generative AI — producing plain-language summaries and explanations

Real-World Partner Inspiration

You may draw inspiration from organizations such as:

- World Wildlife Fund · Project Drawdown · Water.org · Sustainable Ocean Alliance · The Ocean Cleanup
- The Nature Conservancy · ReFED (food waste reduction) · Ellen MacArthur Foundation (circular economy) · Climatebase

What to Submit on Devpost

Devpost Field	What to Include
Qualifier Approval Code	Enter your 8-character code sent via email after passing the AI Qualifier (e.g., XX26-Q7H9K2M1). Submissions without a valid code will be disqualified.
Project Description	A complete description of your solution, the problem you solved, and who it helps.
Track & Challenge Selection	Select your track (High School / Undergraduate / Graduate) and your challenge number.
AI Architecture Explanation	Describe: (1) Inputs — what data goes in, (2) AI capability used (e.g., chatbot, classification, recommendation), (3) What processing happens, (4) Outputs — what the user receives.
Human-in-Loop Design	What is one decision your AI does NOT make? Explain why a human must remain involved at this point.
Responsible AI Guardrail	What is one risk in your system and how did you reduce it? Examples: bias, misinformation, misuse, over-reliance, exclusion.
Tools Used	List all AI tools, models, APIs, and any AI coding assistance. Indicate which are free vs. paid.
Data Disclosure	What data did you use? Include datasets, APIs, or synthetic data. If synthetic, explain how it was created.
3–5 Minute Pitch Video	A video covering: (1) the problem and user, (2) how your AI works, (3) a live or recorded walkthrough, (4) your responsible AI choice.
Working Demo or Walkthrough	A functional prototype, chatbot, workflow demo, interactive mockup, simulation, or decision-support model.

 Your video should show: (1) the problem and user, (2) how your AI works, (3) a walkthrough, (4) your responsible AI choice.

How You'll Be Evaluated

Dimension	Weight	What Judges Look For
Problem Understanding	30%	Is the problem real, local, and clearly explained?
AI Reasoning	20%	Does AI meaningfully help identify patterns or guide action?
Solution Design	20%	Is the system understandable and logically structured?
Impact & Insight	20%	Does this help people take better environmental action?
Responsible AI	10%	Are risks acknowledged and thoughtfully addressed?

💡 Judge's Lens: Judges want to see local specificity. 'A tool for schools' is weaker than 'a tool for a cafeteria manager to predict Tuesday over-ordering.' The more specific, the stronger.

Impact

The strongest projects will:

- Make environmental impact **visible and understandable**
- Help people move from **awareness** → **action**
- Encourage realistic, everyday behavior change
- Turn sustainability from an abstract idea into something people can actually do

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need coding experience?	No. You are encouraged to use no-code and low-code AI tools. What matters is your thinking, not your technical stack.
Can my team be from different countries?	Yes! Teams of 2–5 can span different schools, cities, and countries. Register together on Devpost.
What counts as a prototype?	Anything that demonstrates your AI working: a functional app, a chatbot walkthrough, a workflow demo, an interactive mockup, or a clearly narrated simulation. It does not need to be production-ready.
What should my video show?	Cover four things: (1) the problem and user, (2) how your AI works, (3) a live or recorded walkthrough of your solution, and (4) your key responsible AI choice.
Do paid AI tools give an advantage?	No. Judging rewards reasoning and design thinking, not technical resources. Open-source and free tools are equally valid.
What happens after submission?	Submissions go through AI screening, then judge review (Round 2), then a final panel (Round 3) for the top 10 teams per track. All teams receive results by email.
Can I use AI tools to help build my project?	Yes. You must disclose which AI tools you used in your submission. Using AI to help build does not disqualify you — transparency does.
When will I know if I qualified?	Qualifier results are released June 11–13. You will be notified by email and can also check your status on the hackathon platform.
What if my school doesn't have real data?	That's expected. Create a realistic synthetic dataset based on a typical school and use that. Judges reward thoughtful assumptions over no data at all.
Can I pick a community setting instead of a school?	Yes — a community garden, local event, or neighborhood group is a great context. Just be specific about who the user is and what they're trying to do.

Questions? Contact us at aihackathon@usaii.org or join our Discord: discord.gg/ePjenJnyh4
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