

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From wildfires to flooding to extreme heat, the impacts of climate change are threatening our communities, our health, our wellbeing, our economy, and our future. The existential threat of climate change will increasingly impact all aspects of our society from agriculture to business, from healthcare to education. Heat, air pollution, and extreme weather are already impacting students' health and learning and will only be exacerbated in the future. We must all determine our responsibility to take action and advance climate solutions. To date, the education sector has yet to establish its role in addressing climate change, and large-scale climate solutions too often overlook the role education can play.

Through this action plan, we identify the opportunity for the education sector to take action, advance climate solutions, and prepare today's students to lead a sustainable future. For this plan to succeed, policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels must work in collaboration with school leaders, educators, students, families, and communities. We outline recommendations for policymakers at every level to catalyze and scale localized action across the country.

We envision a future where America's over 100,000 schools are models for climate action, climate solutions, and sustainability, and the 50 million children and youth in these schools are prepared to succeed in the clean economy and lead a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable society. Today's youth are rightly demanding we all take action to address climate change. By supporting our schools in becoming models for climate action, solutions, and environmental justice, we can build lasting change to advance a sustainable future.



Photo by Allison Shelley for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action.

K12 CLIMATE ACTION COMMISSION

In the fall of 2020, the K12 Climate Action Commission — 22 education, environment, youth, civil rights leaders, and more — came together to recognize the urgency of climate change and the opportunity for the education sector to be a leader in creating a more sustainable society. We believe in the potential to unlock the power of the education sector as a force for climate action, climate solutions, and environmental justice.

Over the last year, we held a listening tour to learn about the needs and opportunities to support the education sector in addressing climate change. We heard from youth, educators, school leaders, parents and caregivers, researchers, and policymakers from across the country. We are inspired by their leadership and success in taking climate action in their communities and have grounded this action plan in what we learned.

To unlock the power of the education sector, we must build on existing successes and use policy to catalyze and scale continued action to address climate change in schools. We have identified the need to:

- MITIGATE.** The education sector has a substantial environmental footprint. Our nearly 100,000 public K-12 schools sit on 2 million acres of land and are one of the largest public energy consumers. With 480,000 school buses, our schools operate the largest mass transit fleet in the country. Schools also serve over 7 billion meals each year and generate 530,000 tons of food waste. *To mitigate climate change, the education sector can reduce its carbon footprint and transition to clean energy and sustainable operations.*
- ADAPT.** The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how disruptions to our schools affect all communities. The increasingly widespread impacts of climate change are also disrupting schools, impacting health and learning, and exposing students and communities to trauma and uncertainty. Yet, schools can be key to helping our communities adapt. Schools can work to ensure continued support for learning and services, and school facilities can be used as hubs of community resilience. *To adapt to climate change, the education sector can proactively plan and build resilience in preparation for climate impacts.*
- EDUCATE.** Educators are uniquely positioned to develop, engage, and prepare the rising generation of students to be better equipped to address climate change and to succeed in the clean economy. Educators across subject areas in school and in out-of-school programs can support teaching and learning on sustainability, the environment, green jobs, and climate change and empower students with agency to advance solutions. *The education sector can support teaching and learning on climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability to prepare students to lead a sustainable future and succeed in the clean economy.*
- ADVANCE EQUITY.** Climate change disproportionately impacts Black, Latino, Indigenous, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and other communities of color and low-income rural and urban communities. Climate action in the education sector must center the voices and experiences of students and families in these communities and prioritize their needs and strengths. *To advance equity, the education sector can prioritize communities most impacted by climate change and involve students, families, and community members in decisions about climate action.*

For the education sector to effectively mitigate, adapt, educate, and advance equity to address climate change, we need collaboration across all levels of government and across sectors, including advocacy, business, media, and philanthropy.

SPECIFICALLY, WE RECOMMEND LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS:

LOCAL

Recommendation 1: Acknowledge and prioritize the opportunity for the education sector to advance climate solutions.

Recommendation 2: Develop and implement comprehensive local K-12 climate action plans to consider the needs and opportunities to mitigate, adapt, educate, and advance equity to address climate change. These plans should:

2.1: Support mitigation strategies to transition to clean energy, clean transportation, sustainable food use, and building electrification and to promote healthy learning environments with improved air quality and safe drinking water that are free of environmental toxins.

2.2: Support adaptation and resilience strategies by assessing local climate risks and determining school needs to prepare, adapt, and build resilience to climate change.

2.3: Support teaching and learning on climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability to further integrate teaching and learning about climate change across the curriculum and prepare students for the clean economy.

2.4: Advance equity while developing local K-12 climate action plans by engaging and prioritizing students, families, and communities who are disproportionately impacted by climate change.



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STATE

Recommendation 1: Take a whole-of-state approach to address climate change and include education. This whole-of-state approach should:

- 1.1: Integrate education in plans to address climate change.*
- 1.2: Establish targets and support implementation for transitioning schools to clean energy, building electrification, and electric buses.*
- 1.3: Prioritize communities most impacted by climate change and education inequities.*
- 1.4: Center student voice in developing plans to support the education sector in taking climate action.*

Recommendation 2: Support the development and implementation of comprehensive local K-12 climate action plans. States can play a critical role in supporting local K-12 climate action plans by providing guidance, technical assistance, funding, and resources to school districts to assess local needs and assets and support implementation of local K-12 climate action plans.

Recommendation 3: Advance state-level programs and policies to support mitigation, adaptation, and resilience.

- 3.1: Ensure funding for school infrastructure and school building codes support clean, efficient, sustainable, resilient, and healthy learning environments for children.*
- 3.2: Support the transition to electric school bus fleets.*
- 3.3: Expand access to locally-grown, healthy, sustainable food and increase opportunities for food donation, food rescue, and composting.*
- 3.4: Develop financial incentives or opportunities to support schools in transitioning to clean energy, transportation, and sustainable food.*
- 3.5: Ensure plans for virtual learning can be effective and provide access to all students in preparation for climate-related learning disruptions.*
- 3.6: Support school districts in assessing their vulnerability to climate change and equipping schools as hubs for community resilience.*
- 3.7: Support districts in creating green sustainable schoolyards.*

Recommendation 4: Advance state-level programs and policies to support education.

- 4.1: Integrate climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability in standards across grades and subjects and develop curriculum frameworks, provide professional development, and leverage certification to support educators in teaching the standards.*
- 4.2: Develop career and technical education opportunities to prepare students for jobs in the clean economy and integrate environmental sustainability across all career pathways.*



FEDERAL Recommendation 1: Elevate and amplify the role education can play in climate solutions.

The White House, Department of Education, and other agencies can use their platforms, convening power, and resources to help communicate the need and opportunity for the education sector to contribute to climate solutions. We recommend that the federal government take the following actions to demonstrate leadership to support climate action in schools:

1.1: Build cross-agency collaboration to support the education sector in taking climate action.

1.2: Establish climate change as a U.S. Department of Education priority.

1.3: Center student voice in developing plans to support the education sector in taking climate action.

1.4: Research, recognize, and effectively disseminate best practices gathered across federal agencies to provide states, districts, and schools with easy access to information, research, and strategies to support the sector in moving to climate action.

Recommendation 2: Support the development and implementation of comprehensive local K-12 climate action plans. Grants from the federal government can be used to help school districts develop and implement comprehensive climate action plans to mitigate, adapt, educate, and advance equity to address climate change.

Recommendation 3: Advance federal policies and programs to support mitigation, adaptation, and resilience.

3.1: Invest in school infrastructure to promote clean energy, clean air, clean water, sustainable schoolyards, sustainable food, and climate adaptation and resilience.

3.2: Support the transition to electric school bus fleets.

3.3: Expand access to locally-grown, healthy, sustainable food and increase opportunities for food donation, food rescue, and composting.

3.4: Increase broadband access for schools and families.


3.5: Establish financing opportunities through tax incentives, bond authority, and revolving loan funds.

Recommendation 4: Advance federal policies and programs to support education.

4.1: Prepare youth for jobs in the clean economy and integrate environmental sustainability across all career pathways through career and technical education.


4.2: Enable professional development and teacher preparation programs to support teaching and learning on climate change, climate solutions, and environmental justice.

4.3: Emphasize the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems through existing programs to support Indian Education, Native Hawaiian Education, and Native Alaskan Education and disseminate best practices to build broader awareness of Indigenous knowledge.



To the young people listening who are passionate about protecting the climate and their communities but don't know where to start — look to your schools, there is work to be done.

And to the adults listening who believe in the role our education system must play in addressing climate change and preparing citizens to participate robustly in our democracy, find ways to partner with young people in your community.



You have as much to learn from them, as they do from you.”



— Andrew Brennen,
Co-Founder Kentucky Student Voice Team

