

# rethinking schools

June 29, 2016

Dear Friend,

You are receiving this organizing packet either because you requested it or because we think you are someone who would appreciate having it and sharing it with others.

In May, the Portland, Oregon school board unanimously passed the most comprehensive climate literacy policy of any school district in the country, pledging to abandon the use of text materials that deny the human roots of the climate crisis or that minimize its consequences. The resolution also called for robust professional development opportunities and for every school to implement a climate justice curriculum. It grew out of a collaborative effort of teachers, students, parents, and community activists.

Predictably, the resolution was attacked by right wing media and the climate denial industry. The director of communications at the Heartland Institute wrote that the “logical next step” would be for the resolution’s proponents to “host a book burning ceremony at the football stadium.”

Support for the school board’s resolution poured in from parents, community members, and educators, who applauded Portland’s commitment to offer a climate curriculum that is “participatory, imaginative, and respectful of students’ and teachers’ creativity and eagerness to be part of addressing global problems...” One group, Climate Parents, collected more than 1,000 signatures thanking the Portland school board for passing its resolution.

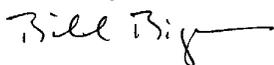
This organizing packet is one result of our collaboration with the Mayer and Morris Kaplan Family Foundation, a foundation interested in addressing climate change through education and policy. The Kaplan Foundation hopes to seed resolutions like the one in Portland around the country and is supporting Rethinking Schools’ efforts, given our previous work.

Included here are materials that we hope might be useful to others wanting to introduce more honest and critical climate change education in schools. This “climate justice packet” features:

- A copy of Portland’s “Climate Literacy” resolution
- A Common Dreams article summarizing the content and significance of the Portland resolution
- A TakePart.com article by journalist Liz Dwyer on the Portland resolution
- “Portland climate education is not indoctrination,” by Tim Swinehart
- Climate Parents’ “thank you” letter to the Portland school board
- “Organizing Lessons from the Portland Climate Justice Resolution,” by Educating for Climate Justice
- A copy of Rethinking Schools’ book *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis*, which includes rich examples of climate justice education

Please let us know if we can help in any way as you work toward a school curriculum that addresses issues that matter.

Sincerely,



Bill Bigelow, Curriculum Editor  
bill@rethinkingschools.org

## RESOLUTION No. 5272

### Resolution to Develop an Implementation Plan for Climate Literacy

#### RECITALS

- A. On the April 19, 2016, several community members, including representatives from 350PDX, presented to the Board of Education's Teaching and Learning Committee a resolution that provided, in part, below:

*At a time when the science of global warming has prompted governments around the world to begin redefining our economies and to call for an end to the fossil fuel era, it is time for school districts to redefine what it means to educate students for a future of certain climate change. Climate literacy is essential for the success of Portland Public Schools students, both as members of their communities and citizens of the world.*

*Climate change is already having an enormous negative impact on nature and people around the world—which will only become worse—including present and future Portland Public Schools students.*

*There is overwhelming consensus in the scientific community that the climate crisis is created by human beings releasing greenhouse gases by mining and burning fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas); through deforestation; and with environmentally damaging agricultural practices.*

*It is essential that in their classes and other school activities students probe the causes and consequences of the climate crisis—as well as possible solutions—in developmentally appropriate ways, and, from pre-K through 12th grade, become “climate literate”...*

*All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice—especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change; and it is vital that students reflect on local impacts of the climate crisis, and recognize how their own communities and lives are implicated...*

*Portland Public Schools does not currently have a strategy for helping district educators to develop or to implement curriculum on the climate crisis...*

*Portland Public Schools' oft-stated commitment to equity requires us to investigate the unequal effects of climate change and to consistently apply an equity lens as we shape our response to this crisis...*

*In implementing its commitment to prepare students for college and careers, Portland Public Schools recognizes that as our society moves rapidly and definitively away from fossil fuels, we will need to prepare our students for robust job opportunities in green technologies, construction, and restoration efforts...*

- B. As part of the resolution presented at the April 19, 2016 Board of Education's Teaching and Learning Committee, there was a request for the following:

*Portland Public Schools [commit] itself to providing teachers, administrators, and other school personnel with professional development, curricular materials, and outdoor and field studies that explore the breadth of causes and consequences of the climate crisis as well as potential solutions that address the root causes of the crisis; and do so in ways that are participatory, imaginative, and respectful of students' and teachers' creativity and eagerness to be part of addressing global problems, and that build a sense of personal efficacy and empowerment...*

*Portland Public Schools [commit] itself to drawing on local resources to build climate justice curriculum—especially inviting the participation of people from “frontline” communities, which have been the first and hardest hit by climate change—and people who are here, in part, as climate refugees...*

*Portland Public Schools [recognize] that our schools must play a leadership role in modeling for students climate- and environmentally friendly practices when it comes to building design, energy use (including the use of solar panels), land use, waste disposal, and composting and recycling...*

*PPS curriculum will make students aware of training opportunities and living-wage jobs in the just transition away from fossil fuels—e.g., retrofitting old buildings to make them more energy efficient, the installation of solar panels, and more sustainable agricultural practices...*

*On a regular basis Portland Public Schools will sponsor activities that bring together teachers, students, and members of the community who are working for a future free of fossil fuels and for just solutions to the climate crisis, to share knowledge, resources, curriculum, and opportunities for students to become active in responding positively to the climate crisis, including learning job skills that will be needed in the transition away from fossil fuels; and ...that in developing a climate action plan for the school district, planners be mindful of proceeding in a way that reflects the ethnic and racial diversity of our student population; and that Portland Public Schools will support each school as it endeavors to effect this policy in response to the climate crisis...*

- C. At their April 19, 2016 meeting, the Teaching and Learning Committee voted 3-0 to support the concept of the development and implementation plan for integrating climate change curriculum into instruction.

## **RESOLUTION**

1. The Board of Education would like to thank the organizations and community partners that endorsed the resolution that was presented to the Teaching and Learning Committee, and for their activism on climate literacy.
2. Guided by the above recitals, the Board of Education directs the Superintendent in collaboration with PPS students, teachers, and community members to develop an implementation plan so that there is curriculum and educational opportunities that address climate change and climate justice in all Portland Public Schools.
3. The implementation plan should include a review of current textbooks for accuracy around the severity of the climate crisis and the impact of human activities. PPS will abandon the use of any adopted text material that is found to express doubt about the severity of the climate crisis or its root in human activities.

# Abandoning Doubt & Denial, School District Officially Embraces Climate Literacy

Portland, Oregon schools call for climate justice and student activism

by

Bill Bigelow, Common Dreams contributor



The Portland, Oregon school district's commitment to rid itself of text materials that encourage students to doubt the severity of the climate crisis or its roots in human activity was prompted by the school district's long use of materials that do just that. (Image: [Patheos.com](http://Patheos.com))

In what may be a first in the nation, this week the Portland, Oregon school board passed a sweeping "climate justice" resolution that commits the school district to "abandon the use of any adopted text material that is found to express doubt about the severity of the climate crisis or its roots in human activity." The resolution further commits the school district to develop a plan to "address climate change and climate justice in all Portland Public Schools."

The resolution is the product of a months-long effort by teachers, parents, students, and climate justice activists to press the Portland school district to make "climate literacy" a priority. It grew out of a November gathering of teachers and climate activists sponsored by 350PDX, Portland's affiliate of the climate justice organization, 350.org. The group's resolution was endorsed by more than 30 community organizations. Portland's Board of Education approved it unanimously late Tuesday evening, cheered by dozens of teachers, students, and activists from 350PDX, the Raging Grannies, Rising Tide, the Sierra Club, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, Climate Jobs PDX, and a host of other groups.

"All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice—especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change."

The resolution's "recitals"—its guiding principles—address the characteristics that the Portland school district seeks to nurture in its students: "All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice—especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change; and it is vital that students reflect on local impacts of the climate crisis, and recognize how their own communities and lives are implicated..."

Portland's resolution also calls for training in green jobs, and notes that "as our society moves rapidly and definitively away from fossil fuels, we will need to prepare our students for robust job opportunities in green technologies, construction, and restoration efforts..."

The school district's commitment to rid itself of text materials that encourage students to doubt the severity of the climate crisis or its roots in human activity was prompted by the school district's long use of materials that do just that. One textbook still in use in Portland schools is *Physical Science: Concepts in Action*, which informs high school students that "Carbon dioxide emissions from motor vehicles, power plants, and other sources may contribute to global warming"—implying that motor vehicles and power plants may not contribute to global warming. The book's brief section on climate change consistently uses may and might and could to sow doubt about the severity and human causes of climate change.

Another text used with almost all Portland high school students is Holt McDougal's *Modern World History*, which includes a scant three paragraphs on climate change, the second of which begins: "Not all scientists agree with the theory of the greenhouse effect." Presumably, Portland's new policy will require that these texts be abandoned.

Rather than asking for the adoption of new textbooks, Portland's resolution imagines a collective process to create and disseminate new materials: The school district will commit itself "to providing teachers, administrators, and other school personnel with professional development, curricular materials, and outdoor and field studies that explore the breadth of causes and consequences of the climate crisis as well as potential solutions that address the root causes of the crisis; and do so in ways that are participatory, imaginative, and respectful of students' and teachers' creativity and eagerness to be part of addressing global problems, and that build a sense of personal efficacy and empowerment..."

Portland's resolution also acknowledges that this curriculum development will not come from education corporations, but needs to be a grassroots process, "drawing on local resources to build climate justice curriculum—especially inviting the participation of people from 'frontline' communities, which have been the first and hardest hit by climate change—and people who are here, in part, as climate refugees..."

In their testimony in support of the climate justice resolution, a number of activists mentioned how they were

inspired by their participation in the recent “Break Free” demonstrations at the Shell and Tesoro oil refineries in Anacortes, Washington. High school student Gabrielle Lemieux told the school board, “We put our bodies on the line by risking arrest with protests and even a blockade of the railroad tracks leading to two major oil refineries.

“I am 17 years old. While I was there, I was asked several times why at my age, I felt it was necessary to risk arrest by standing with other activists. People said to me, ‘You have a whole lifetime ahead of you to get arrested, to do this kind of work.’

“My response is: We don’t have my lifetime to wait. We don’t even have the couple years it will be before I’m truly an adult. My action starts now, or it works never.”

The school board did not accept all components of the resolution introduced by climate justice activists. One plank called on the school district not “to engage in any partnerships with fossil fuel companies, which offer legitimacy to these companies”—targeting Chevron’s Donors Choose program. Another plank in the activists’ version of the climate justice resolution—which the school board omitted—asked the school district to express solidarity with the recent Portland City Council measure opposing “expansion of infrastructure whose primary purpose is transporting or storing fossil fuels in or through Portland or adjacent waterways.”

Still, climate justice resolution organizers and their many supporters who attended this week’s school board meeting were jubilant after the board’s unanimous vote. The vote was greeted with tears, hugs, high fives, and a standing ovation.

As Lincoln High School teacher Tim Swinehart commented after the vote. “Now the real work begins: transforming the principles of this resolution into the education of climate literate students across the district who feel empowered to work toward a more just and sustainable future.”

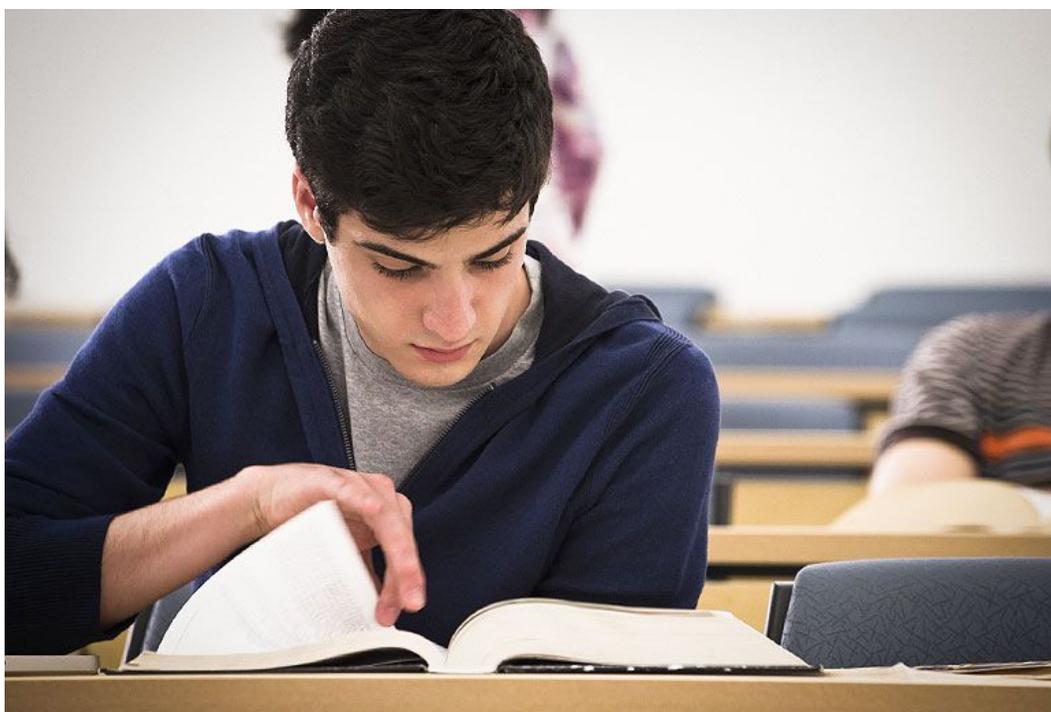
Read the full text of the Climate Justice resolution [here](#) (pdf).

*\* \* \*Bill Bigelow ([bill@rethinkingschools.org](mailto:bill@rethinkingschools.org)) taught high school social studies in Portland schools for many years and co-edited *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis*. He is curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine and is a member of the collective that introduced the climate justice resolution to the Portland school board.*

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# Heating Up the Fight to Get Accurate Climate Change Info in Textbooks

A resolution passed in Portland, Oregon, might be the tipping point K-12 schools need.



(Photo: Ariel Skelley/Getty Images)



YOUR REACH



MAY 24, 2016

Culture and education editor Liz Dwyer has written about race, parenting, and social justice for several national publications. She was previously education editor at Good.

Bio

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Textbooks that cast doubt on whether [climate change](#) is real could soon be a thing of the past in the nation's K-12 classrooms. That's the hope of environmental activists in the United States, including Bill Bigelow, a Portland, Oregon-based former social studies teacher who is the curriculum editor at the nonprofit [Rethinking Schools](#).

Bigelow helped spearhead last week's passage of a groundbreaking climate justice resolution by the Board of Education for the Portland Public Schools. According to the [resolution](#), all schools in the district will "abandon any adopted text material that is found to express doubt about the severity of the climate crisis or its roots in human activity."

**RELATED: [An Inconvenient Truth Director Talks Climate Change 10 Years After](#)**

"So much educational material is soaked in doubt," Bigelow told TakePart. "There's too much at stake for kids these days to be learning this kind of ho-hum curriculum on the climate emergency."

Growing national "support for accurate, science-based climate education has been in the works for some time now with the [launch](#) of the Next Generation Science Standards and their adoption by 16 states thus far," Leah Qusba, the communications director of the [Alliance for Climate Education](#), wrote in an email to TakePart.

Since 2008 the nonprofit alliance has worked to educate teenagers on the science of climate change and empower them to take action. After two years of effort, in April the alliance and its youth leaders helped get a climate education resolution [passed](#) by the New York City Council. The nonbinding resolution recommends that climate change be

taught in Gotham's public schools. Bigelow's actions have "empowered a generation of educators and school administrators to not only teach more climate science, but be very sure that they are teaching accurate, science-based material—not the 'false debate,'" wrote Qusba.

"We've noticed that people are paying attention to [Portland's] story and it wouldn't be surprising to see other school districts follow suit, especially those that have already adopted the Next Generation Science Standards," wrote Qusba. She believes other districts, "especially those that already have great leaders who care deeply about climate education, like the San Francisco Unified School District," will soon follow Portland's lead.

But in Portland the pushback from climate-change deniers against the resolution has been significant, said Bigelow. "It's been interesting and surprising how attached some people are to the idea that climate change is not happening and that this is a conspiracy—that the whole idea of human-caused climate change is a conspiracy," he said.

Ditching such material is a significant step, but equally important is that the resolution also states that the district wants to "address climate change and climate justice in all Portland Public Schools," said Bigelow, and prepare students for the green jobs of the future.

Ahead of the resolution's passage, Bigelow testified about the inaccurate climate-related content found in textbooks in the city's public schools, including *Physical Science*, which is published by Pearson. He cited one passage for its soft language: "Carbon dioxide emissions from motor vehicles, power plants and other sources, may contribute to global

warming.’ This is a section that could be written by the Exxon public relations department and it’s being taught in Portland schools,” Bigelow [said](#), according to the *Portland Tribune*.

Nearly all high school students in Portland use Holt McDougal’s *Modern World History* textbook. “It buries the treatment of the climate crisis on page 679,” Bigelow told TakePart. Although 99.99 percent of scientists [agree](#) that climate change is real, “the second paragraph on that page begins, ‘Not all scientists agree with the theory of the greenhouse effect,’ ” Bigelow said.

The use in textbooks of words such as “may” and “might” and the questioning of the greenhouse effect can cause students to doubt climate change, said Bigelow. It also causes educators to impart inaccurate information during the precious little class time dedicated to climate. Only one to two hours per year are spent educating students on climate change, and [30 percent of educators](#) teach that “global warming is likely due to natural causes,” according to a survey published in the journal *Science* in February.

To counter this misinformation, last year the Alliance for Climate Education “worked with the United States Conference of Mayors to [pass a climate education resolution](#) for high schools so that large U.S. cities prioritize climate education, and know that there are organizations out there like ours that can provide free support. This is especially important since many teachers aren’t yet equipped to teach climate science,” wrote Qusba.

Educators lack accurate, high-quality resources, but “part of it is also that teachers are afraid,” said Bigelow. “Teachers are not necessarily wanting to wade into where it feels like there is a

red-hot controversy. And so long as the climate deniers can make it seem like this is controversial and that there are many sides to this, then they win. They scare people off.”

### **RELATED: [Texas School Board Decides Not to Have Academics Fact-Check Textbooks](#)**

The movement in Portland took off after a workshop for teachers and activists last November that Bigelow teamed up to lead with Tim Swinehart, with whom he coauthored [A People’s Curriculum for the Earth](#), a Rethinking Schools book about climate change and the environmental crisis.

“Out of that workshop we decided that we would start a group to press the school district to take a more affirmative stance on the climate crisis. And so we have been meeting for several months and trying to fashion language for a resolution that we thought was reasonable and comprehensive—and also would address some of the really wretched material that is still in adopted texts that the school district uses,” said Bigelow.

Bigelow believes that “it’s going to take a lot of pressure, a lot of organizing like this. It’s going to take school districts rejecting their stuff” to get textbook publishers to reflect accurate climate science. But he’s been through this fight before.

In 1991 he published *Rethinking Columbus*, a textbook that challenged the story that Christopher Columbus discovered America. “And then communities of color began saying, ‘Oh yeah? Columbus discovered America?’ and saying, ‘No, we’re not going to celebrate genocide. We’re not going to celebrate colonialism.’ That’s when the textbook publishers began responding and changing material,” Bigelow said.

Meanwhile, activists in Portland are focused on “fashioning a

new curriculum, and we need to do it in a grassroots manner,” he said. “There’s been a lot of attention given to what we’re going to get rid of, but now we’re focusing on what we need to build.”

Ideally, said Bigelow, people from the community—teachers, administrators, experts, and activists—will all be a part of that process. “Portland Public Schools has committed to work with us on an implementation plan. We will begin to figure out how we take the really wonderful language of the resolution and make it real, and begin to build the kind of collaboration and network that we need,” he said.

**Take Action with takepart**

**30,575** signed of 50,000 goal

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with

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France  
—  
*about 5 hours ago*

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# Portland climate education is not indoctrination (OPINION)



By **Guest Columnist**

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on May 31, 2016 at 9:40 AM, updated May 31, 2016 at 11:03 AM

## By Tim Swinehart

On May 17, the Portland School Board adopted a policy that makes climate literacy a priority across the district. The purpose of this policy is to provide teachers with training and curricular materials that accurately reflect the global scientific consensus that human-caused climate change is already substantially affecting the world — the world that Portland Public Schools students are inheriting. Faced with a future of certain climate change, the policy argues that "(c)limate literacy is essential for the success of Portland Public Schools students, both as members of their communities and citizens of the world."

In the time since, the school board has been accused of climate "alarmism" and censorship. And most recently, [The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board](#) accused the board of "indoctrination."

Critics of "alarmism" allege that the new policy is academically unbalanced because it calls for students to "probe the causes and consequences of the climate crisis — as well as possible solutions" and claim that teachers and curricular materials should give equal time to scientifically inaccurate arguments that humans are not causing a global climate crisis.

Charges of censorship focus on the policy's directive that the district will "abandon the use of any adopted text material that is found to express doubt about the severity of the climate crisis or its root in human activities." The editorial board specifically takes issue with the subjectivity of the term "severity," implying that "activists" with "pronounced views" of climate change will "indoctrinate" students to think that we are in fact facing a crisis.

One such source of supposed indoctrination would be NASA. As one of the most respected scientific organizations in the world, NASA describes the long-term effects of global climate change at [climate.nasa.gov](http://climate.nasa.gov): "temperatures will continue to rise"; "more droughts and heat waves"; "hurricanes will become stronger and more intense"; "sea level will rise 1 (to) 4 feet by 2100"; and "Arctic likely to become ice-free."

Does "severe" or "alarming" really seem like an overstatement of the facts?

The school board is not censoring anyone. It is simply requiring — as any school board should — that what appears in the curriculum is accurate, and as up-to-date as possible. This is what parents and the larger community expect and deserve. In contrast, The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board continues to give space and legitimacy to columnists who downplay the severity of the climate crisis and, worse, contend that this is all some sort of hoax. It begs the question: Who's really pushing for the indoctrination of Portland's students?

The editorial board also takes issue with the new policy's focus on climate justice. At its core, climate justice seeks redress for the people around the globe who are experiencing the worst of effects of climate change — some of them losing forever their land, homes and way of life — having contributed the least to its causes. Part of the mission of Portland Public Schools is to educate students for global citizenship, which means understanding the profound inequalities that define our world. One of those inequalities is the fact that the United States has contributed more to historical greenhouse gas emissions than any other nation in the world. The editorial board argues that the new policy's focus on climate justice will not produce critical thinkers, but

instead "acolytes" who internalize "a body of values." The editorial board seems to endorse climate change education that is free of values. The school board's policy, on the other hand, affirms the fundamental value that all human lives matter and that all are equally deserving of a stable climate.

In history classes we discuss and analyze the strategies used by social movements to abolish slavery, to gain suffrage for women and to win civil rights for all members of our society. However, we do not debate whether the aims of these movements were socially just. There will come a day in the not-so-distant future when our grandchildren do the same analysis about today's struggle to create a more just and sustainable planet. If we listen hard enough, we can hear them urging us to look beyond next quarter's profits, beyond the next proposed coal export terminal, and to act on their behalf.

On May 17, the Portland School Board showed the leadership and courage to answer this call.

•

*Tim Swinehart teaches at Lincoln High School and Lewis & Clark College and helped to create the climate literacy policy adopted by the school board. He co-edited "A People's Curriculum for the Earth." In 2015 he was named the Oregon Outstanding Social Studies Middle-High School Educator of the Year by the Oregon Council for the Social Studies.*

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## For Immediate Release

June 13, 2016

Contact: John Friedrich, john@climateparents.org, 209-777-6174

### **Over 1,000 parents, grandparents, and science education supporters praise Portland Public Schools for adopting climate literacy resolution**

Portland -- More than 1,000 parents, grandparents, and science education supporters from Oregon and beyond have signed a [letter of thanks](#), written by the pro-climate science education group [Climate Parents](#), to members of the Portland Public Schools Board for adopting a climate literacy resolution in May. The board is meeting tomorrow (June 14) evening in Portland for the first time since the story gained national prominence.

The thank you letter, which was delivered to board members this morning, states:

“Thank you for standing up for Portland students by passing a resolution requiring replacement of textbooks and other instructional materials that contain inaccurate information about human-caused climate change. While we know you've received angry messages from those who refuse to acknowledge the scientific consensus, there are far more of us who strongly support and appreciate your action. Climate change is the largest challenge today's students will face, and they absolutely deserve to be taught the truth about it. You did the right thing for Portland kids, and we're grateful. Thank you for your service, and please keep up the great work!”

The full list of letter signers is attached. Many signers of the thank you letter added supportive comments including these:

*As a former teacher I am so glad the Portland School Board is looking at curriculum that is accurate and scientifically based. Bravo!*

-- Suzanne M. Keller, Scappoose, OR

*I am so proud that the district that I work in is taking steps to present children with the facts and reality of the world they will inherit and have to deal with. We cannot spend any more time with our heads in the sand and I so thankful that the PPS also agrees. Thank you!*

-- Nicole Marsh, Portland, OR

*My child is a PPS high school student who needs accurate information about climate disruption and its sources in order to be able to be an active and effective citizen as an adult. The PPS Board has taken absolutely the right action in standing up for the truth and for teaching the truth. You have my backing and gratitude for acting as you have. I understand that you are coming under pressure to politicize the curriculum against the best scientific understanding, some of that pressure taking vile forms. I stand with you against such bullying. Thank you for doing your educational and ethical duty. In addition to the intrinsic value of your policy for the curriculum, you have set a powerful example to PPS students and Portlanders at large of how to do good public service.*

-- Christopher Lowe, Portland, OR

*Thank you! As a scientist and a mother of a soon to be kindergartener, I appreciate your decision!*

-- Sheilagh Diez, Portland, OR 97215

*I am a grandparent of young students in a target math/science PPS (Winterhaven) School. I am also a community college biology professor. I appreciate that our children will be receiving accurate and scientific information regarding climate change. Thanks you all.*

-- Alice Shapiro, Portland, OR

*Way to go, Portland School Board!! I am proud to be raising three kids in a city that understands how imperative global warming education is to the future of our planet. Thank you for taking a stand!*

—Lindsey Laughlin, Portland, OR

*Denial of our responsibility for maintaining our Earth is deepening the CRISIS. Our children must learn & understand what is happening or they will be blindsided & totally unprepared to manage the crisis. Thank you for defending & demanding a truthful education for our children.*

—Mary McGaughey, Gresham, OR

*As a longtime Portland resident and taxpayer (35 years in one home), thank you for doing the right thing and for standing up for the children of Portland and for the future of all of us. I hope you will stand firm in the face of unwarranted criticism and make us, as taxpayers, proud to support the future of the planet and of the city we love.*

—Judith Aftergut, Portland, OR

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# ORGANIZING LESSONS FROM THE Portland Climate Justice Resolution



ERIK RUIN—A PEOPLE'S CURRICULUM FOR THE EARTH

**T**he climate justice resolution passed on May 17, 2016 by Portland, Oregon's school board was the country's first such comprehensive resolution. From the beginning of our work on the climate justice resolution, the group of parents, teachers, students, and community activists who began meeting in December 2015 hoped that not only would we convince Portland's school board to chart a new course in climate change education, but that we might seed similar efforts around North America. Below, Portland's Educating for Climate Justice, the organization that initiated this effort, offers some thoughts on what contributed to our successful effort as well as some of the things that we'd do differently were we starting over. We hope these will be of use to individuals or organizations considering their own efforts to transform climate education in the schools.

**Start broad, go slow, involve educators and non-educators.** The idea for the climate justice resolution grew out of a workshop that the local 350.org affiliate, 350 PDX, sponsored in November 2015, led by Bill Bigelow and Tim Swinehart, on the Rethinking Schools book, *A People's Curriculum for the Earth*. One of the essential questions of the workshop was "How can teachers and activists collaborate to strengthen climate justice education in schools?" Earlier in the year, Portland's city council had passed a resolution putting the city on record as opposing the use of any city funds to support the development of fossil fuel infrastructure. This successful measure highlighted the possibility of similar community-initiated resolutions that could contribute to climate justice. In the workshop, one of the materials shared was a textbook, Holt McDougal's *Modern World History*, the sole adopted textbook in a course taken by almost all Portland high school students. The book includes a mere three paragraphs on climate change; the second paragraph of the *Modern World History* edition Portland uses begins, "Not all scientists agree with the theory of the greenhouse effect." Workshop participants, especially those unfamiliar with this text, were horrified. We decided to meet again to talk about how we could challenge inaccurate materials and help institute a more robust climate justice curriculum into Portland's schools.

We sent invitations for an inaugural meeting to teachers, 350 PDX activists, and other individuals we knew had a concern for climate justice in the schools. In retrospect, we could have made an even broader call, to make sure that we had the widest participation possible from concerned community, social/environmental justice, and education activists. But our small(ish) numbers—meetings ranged from a low of 8 to a high of 26—allowed for democratic participation and people who had not worked together getting to know one another.

**Draft a quality resolution.** We didn't rush the resolution-drafting. Every meeting began with a read-around of the current draft followed by a point-by-point discussion and word-smithing. By the time we were ready to bring the resolution to the school board, it had been thoroughly reviewed.

**Make an argument for climate justice.** We knew from the start that our resolution wouldn't focus simply on teaching accurate climate science in Portland's schools, but would also advocate for the necessity of climate justice education. For this reason, we included language in the resolution that calls for students to investigate the root causes of the climate crisis, as well as for the involvement of people from "frontline communities" to help the district create and implement curriculum that adequately addresses the human dimensions of climate change. As important as it is for students to understand the science (and the scientific consensus) around human-caused climate change, it is arguably even more important for them to understand the social dimensions of the crisis and to be familiar with the stories of the people around the globe who are fighting to transform the unjust economic and political structures at the root of the crisis. Several of the climate education policies that have already been adopted in cities and states around the country (New York and California, for example) focus exclusively on teaching accurate climate science—and while we applaud these policies as an important place to start, they risk leaving students overwhelmed with the knowledge that a crisis exists, but without the necessary understanding and tools to see themselves as part of a global movement to effect meaningful change.

**Build support before going public.** Individuals in the group volunteered to take the resolution to education, environmental, social justice, labor, student, and religious groups and organizations for endorsement. In some cases, organizations or other individuals had reservations and suggested rewording, which we reviewed in our group and made changes accordingly. We ended up with more than 30 organizational endorsements. Members from a number of these groups joined us when we eventually presented the resolution before the school board. Even though we secured a large number of endorsements, it would have been good for us to have been somewhat more systematic about this than we were, and not to have begun the process with the school board prior to making sure that we had secured all the endorsements possible. As much as possible, our aim was to have this resolution "owned" by the community, rather than just by the group doing the actual drafting.

**Seek support from sympathetic school board members.** School boards vary from community to community, but becoming familiar with school board procedures and the dispositions of different members is crucial to a successful campaign. We were fortunate to have a member of the Portland school board, Mike Rosen, who reviewed the resolution, made suggestions, and met with our committee to discuss the best process to introduce the resolution to the school board. Rosen got us on the agenda of the appropriate school board committee for a presentation, then for an additional presentation before the full board, prior to the final meeting where the resolution was formally introduced and voted on. We had reached out to him early in the process, so that by the time the resolution arrived at the final school board meeting, it was really his resolution, too. We should have made greater efforts to reach out to all the members of the school board. We had contacted a couple of other board members individually, and we presented before the Teaching and Learning Committee of three board members, but we had not "lobbied" very intensively. (The school board includes seven members, elected citywide.) In the end, this did not matter, as the vote was unanimous, but were we to do this again, this is a piece of our organizing we might have given more attention to. It also could have been a way to involve other community members prior to the final board hearing and vote.

**Make school board consideration of the resolution a community event.** We were at somewhat of a disadvantage because the school board meeting we were scheduled for was preceded by a big budget hearing, beginning at 6 pm, and we were told that it could last several hours before the formal school board meeting would begin. So we did not know exactly when to tell our supporters to arrive. Nonetheless, we wanted to make this a community event as much as possible, and so put out an invitation for people to show up wearing red—the anti-fossil fuel solidarity color worn at coal-export and oil-terminal hearings in the Portland area—at 7 pm. We sent email blasts to the local Portland Area Rethinking Schools list, 350 PDX, Climate Jobs PDX, the Climate Action Coalition, Raging Grannies, and others. We held a brief but lively rally in front of the high school where the school board was meeting. We planned in advance which of our

members would testify to ensure that all important topics were covered. A couple of our members talked about the significance of the resolution, and linked what we were doing to the previous weekend's "Break Free from Fossil Fuels" events in Anacortes, Washington, where many of our members had gone to demonstrate and where one had been arrested blocking the BNSF rail lines into the Shell and Tesoro oil refineries. We ended with a song—"Singing for the Climate"—shared with us by Bay Area teacher educator and activist Sudia Paloma. Through the evening, we had close to 100 supporters who came by with perhaps 50 or so staying through the final testimony and board vote, which didn't happen until around 10:30 pm. The vote, as mentioned, was unanimous, and it was greeted by cheers, a standing ovation, hugs, and high fives.

**Have a media strategy** including identifying in advance who will speak on behalf of your organization and how you will handle any criticism or opposition that might unfold during the process. We did not do a good job of reaching out to the media prior to the introduction of our resolution or immediately after. We've been playing catch-up ever since. We simply did not anticipate the vitriol that would come our way from the right wing media. There was an article in the *Portland Tribune*, published soon after the school board passed the resolution. It contained a number of errors, and also a somewhat inflammatory headline: "Portland School Board Bans Climate Change-Denying Materials." The resolution does not use the word "ban," and the *Tribune* article helped shape the right wing media critique—on Fox News; in the *National Review*, *Washington Times*, Glenn Beck's *The Blaze* website, Portland's newspaper *The Oregonian*, etc.—that Portland was banning books (some more lurid outlets said "burning" books.) We should have been ready, prior to passage of the resolution, to help interpret what the school board had—and had not—done. One of our members published a piece at *Common Dreams*, which was also carried by the *Huffington Post* and *AlterNet*, but we should have had other articles and letters to the editor lined up prior to passage. As we realized that we our side was not being heard in much of the media coverage, we reached out to supporters to generate op-eds and letters to the editor; and others joined in, like the national group *Climate Parents*, which launched a *MoveOn.org* thank you petition to the Portland school board.

**Solidify one's base.** We should have immediately communicated the resolution's passage, and our gratitude, to the many organizations that had endorsed our resolution. Prior to the school board meeting, we should have drafted a thank you letter to send out right away to supporters, explaining the significance of the resolution and asking for supportive letters to the editor, op-eds, and letters to school board members. We were stunned by the suddenness and viciousness of the right wing attack on the resolution. We anticipated that there would be those who would challenge the theme of climate justice that was at the heart of the resolution. But the Fox News and internet attacks challenged the very idea of human-created climate change. The right wing narrative of banning and censorship also led to a misinformed statement put out by the National Coalition Against Censorship. All of these attacks would have been more forcefully countered had we been more prompt in communicating both with the media and with our supporters. Our thank you letter could also have included an invitation to continue supporting the effort, because passage of a school board resolution is only the first of many steps.

**Think about implementation from early in the process.** We didn't want our resolution to be overly prescriptive, as we knew that what was most important was launching a process of community-wide collaboration toward climate justice work in the school district. In the final weeks before formally introducing the climate justice resolution to the school board, we began creating an implementation proposal. This helped us imagine concretely what we wanted the school district to do, and when. We were influenced by ALLY (Asian-Pacific Island Leaders for the Liberation of Youth), which had been working on a tiered proposal to introduce Ethnic Studies courses to all Portland high schools. They articulated specific demands for the phase-in of Ethnic Studies courses over a four-year period. We have just finished a document that indicates our expectations for the implementation of our climate justice resolution over several years, and are beginning formal conversations with Portland Public Schools administrators. 🌐

*For more information, contact Bill Bigelow (bill@rethinkingschools.org). "Organizing Lessons from the Portland Climate Justice Resolution" was published and distributed by Rethinking Schools (www.rethinkingschools.org).*