

PARENT ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Introduction

From wildfires to hurricanes, flooding to heatwaves, the impacts of climate change are happening now, and many parents, families, and caregivers are increasingly concerned about what the future will hold for children. But as parents, families, and caregivers we can work to advance solutions—solutions our kids can see in their schools.

Taking climate action in schools can help communities prepare for climate impacts while creating hands-on learning opportunities for students. Many students are already aware that climate change is happening and have shown leadership by asking for adults to take climate action. Learning about climate solutions in schools can help students feel prepared to act in their communities and become leaders for a more sustainable future.

What are K–12 Climate Action Plans?

One way school districts can take climate action is to develop comprehensive K–12 climate action plans. Similar to the climate action plans adopted by city governments, local K–12 climate action plans use a community’s local needs and strengths to inform school efforts to reduce carbon emissions, prepare for climate impacts, and educate students about climate change and climate solutions.

What role can parents and caregivers play?

Parents, families, and caregivers are essential partners in schools and have the power to advocate for changes in their school districts. Parents, families, and caregivers who come together to express their concerns, ideas, and support for issues like climate change can influence school district policies on climate change and climate action. In collaboration with youth leaders and community partners, you can advocate for climate action through district school boards.

This toolkit can help you advocate for developing a local K–12 climate action plan in your school district to:

- Reduce the carbon footprint of your school district;
- Adapt and build resilience to climate impacts;
- Support teaching and learning on climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability; and
- Ensure community input and advance equity.

The goal of using this toolkit is to get your school district to develop a local K–12 climate action plan to address climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience, and education while advancing equity. A local climate action plan in a school district should always be based on community needs and include student, parent, and community input.

Strategies for Successful Advocacy

Collaborating with other parents, families, and caregivers, identifying goals, taking actionable steps, and celebrating success can help advance your advocacy. The tips below are starting points, and the linked resources offer additional detail.



Connect with parents, families, and caregivers within your community

- You can use the link here to find [local PTA chapters](#), [local Mothers Out Front chapters](#), or [Online Community Team](#) (not limited by location).
- You can look to parent listservs, neighborhood networks, and community spaces to find other parents, families, and caregivers who might be interested in taking action.
- [National PTA's Center for Family Engagement](#) offers additional strategies for building meaningful parent engagement in your community.
- Continue building local relationships, begin [tabling](#) and having [face-to-face and/or digital meetings](#), ensuring you are centering your learnings in your goal setting and implementation plan.



Develop your goals and timeline

- Review resources including [parent advocacy trainings](#) for key tips on grassroots advocacy.
- Establish goals for getting your school district to develop and implement a K-12 Climate Action Plan.
- To establish your goals and timeline, it is helpful to know where your district is starting. These [Key Questions](#) can help guide your understanding of what is already in place locally.



Take action

- **Prepare communications:** Developing common language for your advocacy efforts grounded in your local needs can help you achieve success.
- **Find other partners:** Student groups and other educators may be powerful partners to advance your advocacy.
- **Meet with School Board members:** You can find contact information for your school board members on most school board websites and request a meeting. You can also testify at local school board meetings to raise the opportunity for school districts to pass resolutions to develop climate action plans.
- **Meet with your local legislators,** such as county councils, state representatives, state senators, and city officials. Find a champion to take this on and work with them to make it a reality.
- See other advocacy options like how to engage media with this [National PTA Advocacy toolkit](#).



Assess and celebrate success and continue the work

- Once your school district develops a climate action plan, be sure to celebrate your success with other parents, caregivers, students, educators, and school board members!



Key Questions To Help Your Team Get Started

Is your district ready to take action on climate change? These questions can help you begin to gather data and determine opportunities for your district to develop local K-12 climate action plans. For more specific questions, please see [this guide](#).

- Sustainability. Does my district or community have any existing sustainability plans?
- Energy. Does my district have a plan in place to transition to 100% clean energy in schools?
- Transportation. Does my district have a plan in place to transition to 100% clean transportation including zero-emission school buses?
- Food. Does my school district support sustainable food use (for example, locally-sourced food and composting)?
- Adaptation. Does my district have a plan in place to support students when school is disrupted due to extreme weather?
- Teaching and Learning. How, if at all, are climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability taught in my district currently?

Talking Points & Messaging Guidance

Climate change is increasingly affecting every community around the country, yet conversations about climate change can be challenging. Many people are also unfamiliar with the connections between schools and climate change. Helping education leaders, community members, and other parents understand these connections in your local context and drawing connections to health and economic benefits can make advocacy efforts more effective and keep conversations focused on local needs and strengths.

The talking points below can help you explain the connections between education and climate change using key data about the environmental impact of schools and the benefits of pursuing climate solutions. While the talking points cite national data, finding similar data points for your district, county, or state can help make your advocacy more persuasive.



Key Talking Point #1:
*Climate Action Plans
Can Help Schools
Reduce Their Carbon
Footprint*

Overall: With nearly 100,000 schools across the country, schools are one of the largest public sector energy consumers, operate the largest mass transit fleet in the country with 480,000 buses, and serve 7 billion meals every year. As a result, schools have a substantial carbon footprint, which contributes to climate change.

***Net-zero schools are better for our students, our health,
and the environment***

- School districts can lower their carbon emissions by using renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure, transitioning to electric school buses, and reducing food waste. In addition to being more environmentally sustainable, these efforts can also promote student health, save districts money, and create learning opportunities for students.
- Buildings are one of the leading contributors to carbon emissions, and energy costs are among the highest costs for school districts. With schools in every community, reducing the carbon emissions of school buildings can help communities lower their environmental impacts while saving money on maintenance and operations.
- Sustainable infrastructure — including solar panels, geothermal heating and cooling, and LED lighting — can reduce schools' reliance on fossil fuels and improve energy efficiency. School buildings themselves can then be used as tools to help students learn about sustainability and clean energy. Schools that improve their energy efficiency and have solar panels or other sources of renewable energy may be able to become net-zero energy, meaning they produce as much energy as they consume.

***Zero-emission school buses are better for our students, our health,
and the environment***

- Most school buses use diesel engines which produce air pollution that contributes to climate change, harms student health, and impacts academic performance and absenteeism. Transitioning to electric school buses eliminates diesel exhaust, which is better for the environment as well as student and community health. Electric school buses save districts money on maintenance and operations in the long run, but generally have high upfront costs. Districts that establish public-private partnerships can reduce or eliminate the cost barriers to purchasing electric buses.
- The nation's 480,000 mainly diesel school buses are the largest mass transit fleet in the country. Transitioning to electric school buses eliminates carbon emissions and supports student health.

***Sustainable school meals are better for our students, our health,
and the environment***

- School meals are a critical resource for many students and families. Making school food more sustainable can help districts reduce their environmental footprints.
- The process of purchasing, using, and disposing of food contributes to schools' environmental footprints. Serving sustainably grown, local food reduces carbon emissions and can support child nutrition. Districts can reduce food waste by allowing schools to donate extra unopened food and by composting food scraps.

Key Talking Point #2:
*Climate Action Plans
Can Help Schools Adapt
and Build Resilience to
Climate Impacts*

Overall: Climate change impacts communities differently based on their geography. As school districts plan for climate adaptation and resilience, they will need to base decisions on local climate risks.

Schools can plan to provide support for students and families in the event of climate related learning disruptions

- Extreme weather including flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, and high heat have already caused schools to close, disrupting student learning and school-based supports. School districts that plan ahead for extreme weather will be more resilient to the impacts of climate change and can better support students and families.
- Districts that have plans for virtual learning and other supports will be better able to continue teaching and learning.
- Districts that build capacity to support student mental health can help students recover and build resilience to climate impacts.

Schools are centers of communities and can help our communities in emergencies

- Extreme weather can cause power outages and damage homes and other community infrastructure. Schools are already centers of the community and provide students and families with access to important resources such as food and health care. Many schools already serve as emergency shelters. Those that use renewable energy such as solar panels coupled with battery storage — also known as solar microgrids — can continue operating even during widespread power outages. Schools then have the ability to provide critical resources such as food, shelter, electricity, and healthcare to the community. Districts that adopt renewable energy and work with local emergency preparedness organizations can help adapt and build resilience to climate impacts.

Sustainable schoolyards can help reduce community heat and flooding

- High heat impacts student learning and health. Schools sit on about 2 million acres of land nationally. Ensuring schoolyards are sustainable green spaces, rather than heat-trapping asphalt, can create healthy spaces for students to learn and play. These spaces have the added benefit of reducing community heat and flooding.



Key Talking Point #3:
*Climate Action Plans
Can Help Schools
Support Teaching
and Learning on
Climate Change,
Climate Solutions,
and Sustainability*

Overall: Schools are already focused on preparing students for the future and have the opportunity to prepare students to be leaders in a sustainable society. Districts can help teachers incorporate climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability into their existing curricula across grades and subject areas. Districts can also support career and technical education programs that prepare students for jobs in a clean economy.

Cross-curricular teaching and learning about climate change and solutions empower students to lead a sustainable future

- As climate change continues, students who have an understanding of its causes and what they can do to advance climate solutions will be better prepared for the future. Climate change, climate solutions, and sustainability can be integrated across subject areas. Districts support schools in teaching about climate solutions can help students feel empowered to take action in their communities.

Schools can prepare students for success in the clean economy

- As we transition to a clean energy economy, today's students will need to be prepared to address climate change in their careers. Jobs in clean energy industries are some of the fastest growing in the country. Districts can ensure that career and technical education (CTE) programs help students benefit from the increasing demand for high-skill, high-wage jobs in the clean economy.
- Climate change will also impact industries from healthcare to tourism to agriculture, and integrating sustainability into all CTE programs can help students succeed in any career path they choose.

Key Talking Point #4:
*Climate Action Plans
Can Ensure Community
Input and Advance
Equity*

Climate action should include communities most impacted by climate change including students, as partners.

- **Climate action should include students as partners.** As the primary stakeholders in education, students should be included as partners in decision making about climate action. They offer critical perspectives, and meaningfully including students can help them develop agency to advance solutions.
- **Black, Latino, Indigenous, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and other communities of color, low-income communities, people with disabilities, and under-resourced urban and rural communities bear the greatest burdens from negative climate impacts, from greater exposure to pollution to greater vulnerability to extreme weather.** To advance equity and environmental justice, climate action should prioritize communities that are most impacted by climate change and ensure that people in those communities are meaningfully included in decisions about climate actions and the implementation of climate solutions.
- **Climate change exacerbates existing inequities in education.** Due to inequities in education funding systems, schools and districts that serve primarily low-income students and students of color may face greater challenges accessing resources for sustainable infrastructure or other climate solutions. As districts take action on climate change, they should prioritize resources for schools in these communities to ensure that all students in the district can benefit from climate solutions.

Addressing Pushback & Inaccurate Information

While advocating for climate action in schools, you may receive pushback from other parents, community members, or education leaders that is based on inaccurate information. There are several strategies you can use to build support through advocacy and conversations with people in your community.

Understanding the concerns of people in your community and leading with shared values can help build support. **Whether it is an interest in hiking, cooking, health, the economy, or a love for our children, beginning conversations about climate change with shared values and focusing on the local impacts of climate change can help you find common ground.**

Below, you can find examples of respectful ways to respond to those who are skeptical about climate change and taking climate action.

What you might hear: *Climate change isn't real. Look at places where it's colder!*

How you can respond: Climate change is different from daily weather. Weather can change each day and some days will still be cold, but climate change is a trend overtime. These trends are also resulting in more extreme weather including many of the floods, hurricanes, and wildfires that we have seen across the country. These changes will increasingly occur and impact our children's lives into the future, and we have an opportunity to help them better understand the world they will inherit.

What you might hear: *Climate change isn't caused by people or human behavior.*

How you can respond: While there have been changes in global temperatures throughout history, global temperatures have increased much more rapidly since the Industrial Revolution made burning fossil fuels a widespread practice. The evidence showing that human behavior causes climate change is so strong that 97% of scientists agree that human activity is the driving force behind climate change. We've also seen that advancing climate solutions, like transitioning to electric school buses, can help us all breathe clean air and improve our children's health.

What you might hear: *Climate change doesn't impact me and my family. There are more important things for us to work on.*

How you can respond: Climate change is impacting communities all around the country, but the impacts can look different in each community. Flooding, droughts, wildfires, and high heat can all be caused by climate change. These events are only expected to increase over time. Climate change also affects many other things besides the environment, including health and the economy, which means addressing climate change can also help address other important issues in the community.

What you might hear: *Climate change is out of our control! I'm just one person. What I do, or even what my one school does, won't impact climate change.*

How you can respond: Parents, families, caregivers, students, community members across the country and around the world are also taking action on climate change. Together, these actions can have a big impact! Families and schools that address climate change also have the important opportunity to help children and youth learn that they have the power to make a positive impact. Taking action in schools and with students prepares young people to be leaders in a more sustainable society.



Glossary of Key Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
Alternative Fuel	Fuel derived from a source other than gasoline. Examples include electricity, biodiesel, and ethanol.
Career and Technical Education (CTE)	Prepares students to enter the workforce or pursue postsecondary education or training after high school. Components can include work-based, project-based or hands-on learning.
Career Cluster	Category of related career paths (e.g. agricultural and natural resources, STEM).
Climate Change	Long-term changes in average weather and climate, regionally and globally.
Climate Literacy	An understanding of your influence on climate and climate's influence on you and society. In the late 2000s, scientists and educators collaborated to define climate literacy, identify principles and concepts that should be taught, and justify the teaching of climate science.
Composting	The practice of returning natural food remains back into the the earth for the purpose of enriching soil.
Culturally Responsive Teaching	A method of teaching that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.
Curriculum	Lesson plans and other resources for teachers that detail how course content should be taught. Curricula are generally created or selected to align with relevant standards in a subject and grade level. Curriculum decisions are often made at the district or school level.
Decarbonization	The process of phasing out reliance on carbon across all parts of the economy.
Deeper Learning	Opportunities for students to develop skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and communication that help them succeed in school and after graduation.
Eco-Anxiety	Persistent worries about the future and the prospects for future generations due to climate change.
Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)	The primary source of federal funding for public K through 12 education. The law was last reauthorized in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
Elementary and Secondary Education Relief Fund (ESSER)	As part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP), ESSER provides states and districts with funding to address challenges in education related to the pandemic. Districts have significant flexibility in how they can spend ESSER funds.
Energy Retrofitting	An energy conservation measure in an existing building that aims to improve building performance.
Environmental Literacy	Develops students' understanding of how individual and collective actions impact the environment and prepares students to make environmentally conscious decisions.
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	The latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which is the primary source of federal funding for public K through 12 education.

Geothermal Energy	Energy derived from the earth's heat that is converted into thermal or electrical energy.
Greenhouse Gases	Gases that contribute to global warming by absorbing infrared radiation, such as carbon dioxide and methane.
Heat Island	Areas that have an average temperature 1.25°F higher than the surrounding city or town.
HVAC Systems	Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning commonly used to cool and heat residential and commercial buildings.
Indigenous Knowledge Systems	A holistic, observational, and systematic way of understanding the environment and its connection to culture and society. IKS has been taught in Indigenous communities since time immemorial, long before the American public-school system was established.
Informal Learning	Learning that takes place outside of structured classroom-based settings. Includes media consumption and community-based learning.
Idling	When a vehicle's engine is running while the vehicle is not in motion.
LEED Certification	Internationally recognized system for rating sustainable building design, construction, and operations. Each of the four certification tiers requires a minimum number of sustainability strategies.
Local Food Procurement	Sourcing food from local growers or producers to decrease emissions associated with transporting food. Also includes choosing sustainably produced food products.
Local K-12 Climate Action Plan	Comprehensive plan by a school district to reduce carbon emissions, prepare for climate impacts, and educate students about climate change and climate solutions based on the community's local needs and strengths.
National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	A federally-assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to students.
Net-Zero Energy Emerging	Buildings that are undergoing planning, design or construction to reach net-zero energy goals.
Net-Zero Energy School	Produces enough renewable energy to meet its own annual energy consumption requirements, thereby reducing the use of non-renewable energy in the building sector.
Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)	A set of standards developed by states based on the National Research Council's (NRC) 2012 research-based Framework for K-12 Science Education.
Out-of-School Time Programs (OST)	Educational programs such as afterschool, before school, and summer programs that support student learning and development.
Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V)	The primary source of federal funding for career and technical education programs in public K-12 schools. The law was most recently reauthorized in 2018.
Place-Based Education	A method of teaching where educators use the local environment to teach academic content through hands-on learning.

Program of Study	Progression of classes a student takes to complete a CTE program.
Project-Based Learning	A method of teaching that is driven by student inquiry, provides hands-on learning, and uses a project as the central tool for instruction.
Renewable Energy	Energy produced from resources that are easily replenished and do not have detrimental effects on the health of humans or the environment. Examples include solar, wind, and geothermal energy. Also referred to as clean energy.
School Breakfast Program (SBP)	Federal program that subsidizes the cost of breakfasts served in schools. Allows students to receive free or reduced-price meals based on family income.
School Gardens	Gardens on school grounds that provide an interactive opportunity for students to learn the science of sustainable food growing practices outside the classroom.
Share Tables	Carts or tables in school cafeterias that are used to exchange unwanted, pre-packaged food to reduce food waste.
Solar Energy	Energy derived from sunlight that is converted into thermal or electrical energy.
Solar Microgrids	System of renewable energy that is separate from the main power grid in a given area.
State Standards	Statements that define what students should know and be able to do by the end of a certain course in a specific grade. Standards for public schools are generally set at the state level.
Sustainability	Meeting present needs without risking the health and environmental wellbeing of future generations.
Sustainability Director	A school or district staff member who manages a variety of sustainability efforts.
Sustainable or Green Schoolyards	Redesigning school grounds to replace asphalt with green spaces or other native vegetation. Sustainable schoolyards mitigate flooding and reduce heat islands.
Teacher Certification	The process of obtaining a license to teach in a public school. Teacher certification requirements are determined by states and often include taking certain courses, classroom-based experience, and passing an exam.
Teacher Preparation (Pre-Service)	Programs that train teachers before they enter the workforce.
Teacher Professional Development (In-Service)	Programs that provide additional learning opportunities for educators who are already in the field.
Tribal Sovereignty	Tribal nationals govern themselves and their interactions with state or federal governments are considered nation-to-nation relationships.
Vehicle-to-Grid	An energy system that transfers electricity between plug-in vehicles, such as electric powered buses, and a larger power grid.
Volkswagen (VW) Environmental Mitigation Trust	The VW trust allocates \$2.9 billion to all states to reduce air pollution from large vehicles as part of the company's settlements for misleading emissions tests.

Useful Resources

- [Local K-12 Climate Action Plans: Key Questions to Get Started](#)
- [Menu of Climate Solutions for Schools](#)
- [Full K12 Climate Action Plan](#)
- [Electric School Buses=Healthier Kids | Spanish](#)
- [National PTA'S Position Statement – Environmental Health, Remediation, Sustainability and Climate Change](#)
- [National PTA Healthy Lifestyles, Healthy Earth](#)
- [Climate Change and Children's Health](#)
- [Mom's Conversation with Katherine Hayoe: Talking about Climate Change in Your Community](#)

Sign up to Stay in Touch:

- [National PTA](#)
- [Mothers Out Front](#)
- [K12 Climate Action](#)

Acknowledgements

K12 Climate Action is a part of This Is Planet Ed at the Aspen Institute, an initiative that intends to unlock the power of education as a force for climate action, climate solutions, and environmental justice to empower the rising generation to lead a sustainable, resilient, and equitable future. This Is Planet Ed works across Early Years, K-12, Higher Education, and Children's Media to build our societal capacity to advance climate solutions. www.thisisplaneted.org

Mothers Out Front is founded on the conviction that there is no more powerful force for change than women mobilizing to protect their children. We know that when we come together for climate, racial, and social justice to tell our stories and share our dreams for our children, we cannot fail. www.mothersoutfront.org

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