

Sea Change

Effective
Communications for
**Climate Education
Policy**

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PREPARED BY

7 november inc.

FOR



Coalition for Climate Education Policy

Advancing climate literacy for a just and sustainable future

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Introduction and Methodology

From the state of Maine to the state of Washington, from a single county in Maryland to single schools in the Midwest, climate change education is starting to become more accessible and equitable through the adoption of new education policies. These policies are spreading climate change education to more students, bringing new opportunities and experiences to educators, and beginning to address the urgency with which our rapidly changing climate needs to be understood, resourced and confronted.

This study applies a strategic communications lens to the accomplishments of **New Jersey, Maine** and **Montgomery County, Maryland**, in developing, securing approval of and implementing climate change education policy. As such, it does not include extensive details on policy formation or implementation but offers additional resources on those topics in the Resources section.

This report lays out how the New Jersey, Maine and Montgomery County policies were messaged, which strategies were used to engage stakeholders, and how communications challenges were overcome. The findings and recommendations are designed to serve as a roadmap for climate change education advocates, so they can blend curriculum and facilities, arts and sciences, public policy and private advocacy in ways that scale climate literacy within their own communities.

Methodology

- 1. An audit and analysis of publicly available communications assets** from New Jersey, Maine and Montgomery County policy development and approval, including press releases, websites, social media content, press coverage, public presentations and comments. Qualitative analysis was applied to discern themes, trends and patterns.
- 2. One-on-one, 45-minute interviews with multiple representatives from each jurisdiction** who were in leadership, communications or advocacy roles during the development, approval or implementation of the policy in question. Interviews used common question sets, and responses were captured without attribution to encourage candor. A complete list of interview participants may be found in the Acknowledgments.
- 3. A review cycle of draft case studies with interview participants** to check for accuracy and completion.

About the Coalition for Climate Education Policy

The **Coalition for Climate Education Policy** is a diverse and multisector coalition of organizations advocating for federal policies and cross-agency efforts to advance climate literacy in the United States. As a non-partisan network, it works to advance climate change education and ensure that education and engagement are part of the toolbox of solutions to build more resilient communities, advance justice and equity, and create a climate-ready workforce.

Common Threads

While New Jersey, Maine and Montgomery County each had their own communications approach tailored to their communities, several themes connected all of the successful campaigns.

Listen to student voices, then make space for them to lead

Students around the globe are taking inspiring action on climate change — including asking for more comprehensive climate education in their schools — and many are looking for opportunities to contribute in their local communities. Creating space for them to organize and providing opportunities for them to speak publicly brought energy, awareness and supporters to each policy. In Maryland, the students even wrote the first brief that later became — almost entirely — the final policy. Trust and support, but don't script, the student advocates.

Center equity

Messaging that frames climate change education as a pathway to addressing environmental injustices is highly resonant. Policies that will reach all students, including those historically underrepresented in environmental literacy and outdoor spaces, further underscore the equity imperative.

Engage stakeholders early, authentically and often

Educators, union representatives, facilities managers, curriculum developers, student government, administrators, parents and other stakeholders each have perspectives on how climate change could be taught. Reaching them on their terms, bringing them into the conversations and truly listening to their voices led to more robust policies with widespread public support.

Find (or build) and activate networks

Successful campaigns leverage as many affiliated networks as possible. Networks of like-minded nonprofits, educators and others spread awareness among their circles of influence, advocate for policies and demonstrate a broad base of support for change. Building mutually beneficial network relationships well in advance of a policy campaign can provide a quick start to garnering support for a new initiative.

Use positive messaging frames to inspire with what is possible

Climate change communications often come in deficit frames. When working to bring supporters into the climate change education conversation, advocates found highlighting the potential for creative solutions (pointing out what is already working), a climate-ready workforce and greener, healthier communities to be more motivating and effective.

Be part of a larger movement

Education policies that fit into a broader country or statewide climate plan get a head start on awareness, funding and support. Don't go it alone — advance the good work the community has already prioritized.

Ask for help

In each successful campaign, organizers boldly reached out to their networks, partners and followers to make direct asks for support. This outreach brought lobbyists, marketing and communications professionals, legislators, students and other stakeholders into the work of the campaigns, significantly increasing awareness and capacity. Making specific asks of others can (and likely will) propel the campaign forward. The worst they can say is no.

Use intentional language

Successful campaign communications understand the local vernacular and the resonance of certain terms with the community and build messaging accordingly. Words such as *mandate* and even *climate change* may push away stakeholders before they can fully understand the initiative. Depending on the community, terms such as *updated learning standards* (New Jersey), *teacher professional development* (Maine) or simply *climate education* (Montgomery County) were more resonant.

New Jersey: *Friends in High Places*

Policy name	2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards
Date implemented in schools	Fall 2022
Topline	Embeds climate change education across the state's K-12 learning standards in seven content areas (as well as the appendices of mathematics and English language arts guidelines).
Number of school districts	599
Number of students	1.3 million
Allocated budget	+ \$5 million



**How did we do it?
We got lucky with a great first lady.”**

In early 2020, when New Jersey’s K-12 student learning standards came up for their five-year renewal, climate change education met its moment. A broad-based network of stakeholders committed to improving environmental education had already invested years in advocacy and coalition building. When the state’s first lady, Tammy Murphy, announced her personal commitment to scaling climate change education in a 2019 editorial, three critical elements for the success of the initiative clicked into place: her advocacy, the networks ready to engage, and the imminent timing of the 2020 student learning standards review.

The communications strategy behind the initiative was informal but effective. It is not accidental that the initiative kicked off with an opinion piece from Mrs. Murphy, carefully outlining the importance of climate change education and hitting key messages like localizing climate change impacts to New Jersey (vanishing shorelines, harmful algal blooms, blazing hot summers) and the benefits to students and the economy.

The revised learning standards were approved in 2020 and began rolling out in the schools in the fall of 2022 (following a delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Governor Murphy has allocated \$5 million to the effort, to be implemented by a new Office of Climate Change Education within the New Jersey Department of Education.

In New Jersey, each district has the freedom to develop its curriculum designed to the standards. Going forward, a crisp communications strategy that elevates classroom success stories and spreads awareness of available resources will be important to the scaling and consistency of the work.

Communications Strategies

Center educators' voices

The strategy to advance the new standards centered on building credibility by elevating teacher voices. Educators participated in the development of the standards, during which first lady Murphy personally met with more than 130 of them. Personalized messaging focused on ease of implementation. For example, a New Jersey Advanced Placement Environmental Science teacher was **interviewed on NPR**, highlighting the ease-of-implementation message with descriptions of ready-made lessons and materials. Other New Jersey educators served as spokespeople for the new standards **on PBS**, in the **Washington Post**, **Hechinger Report** and **other major media**.

Using multiple communications channels to reach varied stakeholders

Communications tactics included periodic press releases from Governor Murphy's office and the New Jersey School Board Association, social media sharing, Facebook Live events, local and national media interviews and placing contributed opinion pieces.

Sharing successes

Efforts were made to publicly share classroom success stories, again sharing the educators' perspectives. The First Lady's office amplified these stories on **social media**, often tied to an event such as Climate Week in New Jersey.

Amplifying student voices

Students were also engaged and their voices were elevated during the standards review period. For example, the first lady's office convened a Youth Climate Summit in partnership with New Jersey Audubon.

Positive message framing

Messaging strategy intentionally framed climate change as an area for innovation and creativity. This positive framing enables students to see how others have applied creativity in problem solving, inspiring them to see themselves as having agency in addressing climate change. In the words of one advocate, “Climate change is not a scientific problem alone. We have to look at innovation and creativity. If children don’t see the ways in which humans have used their creativity to try to solve the problem, you’ll end up with hopelessness, angry parents and depressed kids.”

Staying on message

Talking points for the adoption of the standards focused on the interdisciplinary nature of climate change education, solutions building, hope, creativity and innovation. Advisors also agreed and communicated that the initial areas for focus would be on professional learning, curriculum development, community engagement, and supporting administrators and school boards.

A diverse leadership committee

Following the adoption of the new standards in 2020, the New Jersey Climate Change Education Thought Leader Committee was chartered to develop recommendations for implementing the updated standards. As a diverse group of experts in climate and education, the federal government and the private sector, stakeholders were engaged early on and served as communications conduits to their various audiences. While sharing their expertise, committee members worked to raise awareness and support for the new standards with other stakeholders.

“Climate change is not a scientific problem alone. We have to look at innovation and creativity. If children don’t see the ways in which humans have used their creativity to try to solve the problem, you’ll end up with hopelessness, angry parents and depressed kids.”

Messaging

The most consistent messages (not in priority order) used across multiple media and with multiple stakeholders

New Jersey would be the first in the nation to infuse climate change education throughout all schools and subject areas.

Climate change is local and deserves a local response. New Jersey is seeing disappearing shorelines, super storms, hot summers and more. The estimated impact of climate change on the state of New Jersey? \$10 billion.

This generation will feel the effects of climate change more than any other, so it is critical they have opportunities to study and understand the crisis. A key part of public education is to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to be effective participants in shaping the future.

Comprehensive climate change education is a step toward strengthening the future of New Jersey's green energy economy, and it will create jobs. *"It's not just scientists who will need a deep understanding of this issue, but urban planners, artists, engineers, insurance brokers, entrepreneurs and more."*

The revised standards can be integrated into existing curricula and will enhance the lessons already in place. There are small steps educators can take that will make a big impact on students.

Having climate change education as a requirement is necessary to ensure all students have the same learning opportunities as they do with all required subjects.

School districts within New Jersey will have the freedom to customize how they teach the standards.

Avoid words such as *mandate*.
It is an *updated learning standard*.

Stakeholders

Key audiences engaged in the development, approval and implementation of the standards

Educators

Leadership of statewide agencies, including the Department of Education and the Department of Environmental Protection, as well as the Governor’s Office.

Education and environmental nonprofit organizations

State universities

Environmental education coalitions

School district administrators and leadership

Professors of education

Communications Lessons Learned

What might other jurisdictions do to advance climate change education in their area?

If you have a prominent voice at the table, use it.

First lady Murphy generously applied her name to author op-eds, tweets, **videos** and public testimony and lent her time to meet with educators, administrators and students. Her office amplified this voice through press releases and social media. Find the person at the highest level of government or within the community who is interested in climate change education, and make it easy for them to be a visible champion for the cause.

Have a coalition in place prior to launching a new initiative.

Most states, cities and districts have multiple organizations working on various pieces of climate change and education. Learn who they are, then bring them together — or join them if they are already working together in the community — to build alliances, serve as a united front on the importance of the issues and be deployed as an integrated network of communications champions. Conduct a landscape analysis — even if on a small scale — to understand who is already involved in the work, and bring them into the conversation.

Don't go it alone.

Partner with smart people who understand the state/county/district's decision-making process.

Maintain message discipline.

Within stakeholder groups and communications teams, **come together around standard definitions and use common language**. For example, “equity” rather than “social justice” resonated most for New Jersey audiences. Describing the climate standards as “across content areas,” not “all content areas” was an important distinction given the nuances of how they would be incorporated into math and English language arts. The word “mandate” has negative connotations in the field (and is not accurate in New Jersey) and needs to be avoided.



Pick your moment.

New Jersey's initiative was well-timed because the state was due to renew its student learning standards in 2020. Climate change education was folded into a routine standards review, requiring adoption by the State Board of Education but not approval by school districts or the state legislature. The governor was able to fund the work through his discretionary budget.



Build as long a runway as possible.

When COVID disrupted learning in 2020, the Thought Leader Committee benefited from having more time to prepare implementation recommendations and educator resources. When the 2022 school year began, many of those resources were already in place for launch. New Jersey would have welcomed even more planning time: interviewees noted that it would have been ideal to have the Office of Climate Change Education up and running prior to the rollout of the standards in schools.

Maine:

Homegrown and Youth-Driven

Policy name	“A Resolve To Establish a Pilot Program To Encourage Climate Education in Maine Public Schools” (LD 1902/ HP 1409)
Date implemented in schools	Fall 2022
Topline	Establishes a three-year pilot program providing grants for professional development and teacher training for climate education, prioritized for historically underserved communities. Assists school districts in partnering with nonprofit, community-based organizations to create and implement climate science teacher training that is interdisciplinary and aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) .
Number of school districts	192
Number of students	176,000
Allocated budget	\$2.1 million



We knew we had the right framing in place to get a policy like this passed.”

Maine is, by its residents’ descriptions, a small state. When you look at the state’s political, educational and environmental sectors, it feels even smaller. In a community where everyone knows everyone, climate change education can and did happen by activating existing networks, recruiting well-connected volunteers and, above all, organizing and amplifying the passionate voices of Maine’s students.

The team behind Maine’s pilot program was able to move quickly and advocate with precision because its members understood the specific nuances of their state’s culture and brought multiple parties together to create a homegrown, Maine-specific initiative. The work was intergenerational, community-driven, realistic and effective.

Jan 2019

Census for Community-Based Environmental Learning identifies climate change education as top professional development request for teachers.

February – June 2020

Climate change education is identified as a top shared priority at a network convening of outdoor learning advocates. At the Maine EEA’s 2020 Climate Education Summit, educators, students and advocates identify specific education policy priorities.

Dec 2020

Maine Climate Council releases *Maine Won’t Wait*, a four-year action plan, but fails to name climate change education as a strategy.

At that moment, a window of opportunity presented itself to advocates to frame climate change education as a strategy to address the state’s big goals. With a budget surplus of federal relief funds and a potential change in administration looming, the group knew it had to mobilize quickly. In addition to the Nature Based Education Consortium and the Maine Environmental Education Association, existing networks broadly focused on outdoor engagement and environmental education were already in place across the state, ready to be activated. Teachers, students, legislators, lobbyists and advocates came together to craft and advance the initiative, which would eventually be passed by the legislature (despite an initial rejection) in its 2022 emergency session.

Communications Strategies

A shared strategy

Although the **Nature Based Education Consortium** (NBEC) Climate Advocacy Working Group led the work, the strategy, goals and process were very much shared by the community. This was critical to demonstrating broad support for climate change education and activating multiple networks to engage the maximum number of supporters. Events such as the 2021 Maine Climate Education Summit — which brought together hundreds of educators, students and organizations — demonstrated a broad base of support to the public and policymakers.

A passionate legislative champion

The NBEC working group, through the connections of a public school teacher, secured Rep. Lydia Blume as the bill's sponsor in the Maine House of Representatives. Blume helped draft the bill, built support for the working group, wrote op-eds, guided the group when the original bill failed to pass and recruited Sen. Cathy Breen, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, as the lead sponsor of the Senate version of the bill.

Building the bench

NBEC offered human resources to lead the communications strategy, led by its network coordinator, who had an extensive marketing background, and a full-time communications staffer. The working group used its networks to secure pro bono support from three professional lobbyists. These lobbyists advised on messaging, made introductions to policymakers, organized youth involvement and shepherded the policy through the legislature.

A focus on teachers, supported by data

From the start, the initiative focused on teachers as the conduit to advancing climate change education. Their self-identified need for professional development (via the 2019 census) became the policy's frame, and their voices were incredibly persuasive with the press, legislators and the public.

Student leadership

Maine's youth showed up in a big way to advocate for the education they want and deserve, and their support is pointed to as one of the primary reasons for the bill's success. They were in the room with the advocates for every decision, lobbied their elected officials, published thought pieces and gave media interviews. Several hundred students participated in the Youth Day of Action at the state capital.

Correcting misconceptions

More than once, Maine's initiative was hindered by negative or inaccurate perceptions, and its proponents proactively set the record straight. When a Portland Press Herald editorial called the bill's worth into question, teachers and students rose up to defend it and published editorials of their own. When the bill's co-sponsor initially voted against it because the words *climate change* were in the title, the advocates sprang into action and, over three days, created new materials, spread the word and flipped enough votes to keep the policy alive. When it was discovered some legislators held the misconception that the bill contained a mandate and pushed for curriculum requirements (instead of funding for teacher professional development), advocates held information sessions with the legislative council to clarify the bill's contents, and the initial rejection was unanimously overturned.

Grassroots organizing for the win

Throughout the legislative process, grassroots organizing brought educators, students and advocates to the front of the conversation. For example, after the bill passed in the House, grassroots organizers mobilized students and teachers to call members of the Senate Appropriations Committee to voice support. The callers didn't let up until the policy was passed, funded and on its way to implementation.

The power of the press

Earned media coverage — the placement of stories or messages in journalist-written or produced pieces — is the most influential form of communication. The Maine team used earned media strategies to great advantage. **Op-eds** were written and published statewide from a variety of perspectives, including student leaders, teachers, Rep. Blume and the NBEC working group. Advocates leaned into their networks to reach out to media contacts and place stories throughout the campaign.

Messaging

Most consistent messages (not in priority order) used across multiple media and with multiple stakeholders

All young Mainers need the tools to live, work and succeed on a rapidly warming planet.

Everything in this policy was teacher-driven and informed.

Professional development support for teaching climate change was the top request of Maine’s educators in the 2019 census. The bill is an important and necessary investment in Maine’s teachers.

The bill is centered in equity.

Schools and students that are historically underserved will be prioritized, and a position created within the Department of Education to support underresourced schools in applying for grants.

As the pandemic stretches on, teachers and students need support for their mental and physical well-being. Most climate education takes place outdoors and with community partners — proven ways to meet academic and social and emotional development needs. Helping youth feel like they can make a difference is a powerful tool to combat common feelings of hopelessness.

Workforce development efforts in Maine depend on a well-prepared education pipeline. Efforts to build a green economy begin with young people inspired to pursue new career paths.

Do not refer to any provision as a “mandate.” The bill creates professional development opportunities for teachers, who are already required to be teaching to the NGSS standards.

Stakeholders

Key audiences engaged in the development, approval and implementation of the standards

Local youth advocacy organizations

State policymakers

Environmental and environmental education nonprofits

K-12 educators and students

Communications Lessons Learned

What might other jurisdictions do to advance climate change education in their area?

Get a headstart by building on other successes.

Once the Maine team committed to campaigning for climate change education, its members looked for examples of what was working in other states. Starting with Washington state's **Clime Time** initiative gave them a headstart on how to frame the policy (even borrowing specific language). When they examined Clime Time, they recognized it had been tailored to local needs. Building out the Maine policy to reflect the specific needs of Maine's educators and students became critical to its success.

Community driven — in word and in practice.

Find points to bring different stakeholders together to advocate, and, individually, into the decision-making process. Tailoring the bill's language according to concerns raised by the community (for example, not overloading teachers with grant applications) was key to its ultimate passing.

Have as long a runway as possible.

Understand what conditions, networks, data and partners would improve the case for new policy, and work to put as many of them as possible in place before launching the campaign — ideally, a year or more in advance.

Tailor messages.

Advocates had a set of consistent messages that they modified slightly for different audiences, allowing for both message consistency and greater resonance with their audiences.

Prioritize intergenerational organizing.

The NBEC working group was powerful because of its diversity. For example, youth advocates from high school through college, their teachers and hundreds of students showed up during the Youth Day of Action.

Be strategic and proactive with the press.

A negative editorial that questioned whether the bill was a good use of funds ended up galvanizing students and teachers to write a barrage of op-eds in response. In this way, advocates got ahead of the narrative, later supplementing with FAQs, earned media coverage and other promotional materials.

Bring youth into “the room where it happens.”

Youth perspective was what mattered when meeting with legislators and their stories were most persuasive. Partnering with an organization that facilitates authentic connection and activates youth leadership can be another path to engagement.

Build a strong, diverse team of experts who can advise on the legislative process, open doors and decide how far to reach.

Don't be afraid to ask them — push, if necessary — for what is needed.

Montgomery County, Maryland: A Perfect Storm

Policy name	Policy ECA, Sustainability
Date implemented in schools	Spring 2022
Topline	Commits the school district to cutting greenhouse gas emissions 80% by 2027 and 100% by 2035 compared to 2005 levels, in line with the county's Climate Action Plan. To achieve this, the policy centers environmental sustainability in every aspect of Montgomery County Public Schools, from the type of energy powering school buildings to the depth of climate change education students receive in the classroom.
Number of school districts	210
Number of students	160,564
Allocated budget	No additional funds outside of County Climate Action plan



It was no one thing, no one person. Just a perfect storm of organic work happening from students, interest and engagement from inside the system, and external work at county and state levels.”

Three forces converged on Montgomery County, Maryland to create the optimal environment — a “perfect storm” — for the public school district to imagine and pass a comprehensive climate change education policy.

In 2019, the County adopted a Climate Action Plan listing 20 actions required to be taken by its public schools, and shortly after, the state passed a law mandating schools to update their energy policies within the year. Meanwhile, student activism was on the rise, as students demanded green schools, energy efficiency and comprehensive climate education. Against this backdrop, the state of Maryland was holding students to an environmental literacy graduation requirement — the first state in the country to do so.

Student advocacy was critical to the success of the school district policy. Students led the charge to make Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) more sustainable, their education more comprehensive and their career paths more robust. It was students who wrote and presented the **initial advocacy brief** to the school board, participated on advisory teams, held protests and petitions, attended symposia and authored **opinion pieces** in local media.

In June 2022, the Board of Education unanimously voted to approve the policy, centering environmental sustainability in every aspect across the district, from environmental literacy in the curriculum (in multiple K-12 content areas) to school infrastructure and operations. The result is one of the most aggressive sustainability policies on the East Coast, created and managed entirely at the local level.

Communications Strategies

Be part of a larger story.

All communications presented the new policy as being in absolute alignment with and advancing the county Climate Action Plan. This showed the work as coming from and in service to the broader community, and as having county-level support.

Center urgency and equity, in both the problems and the solutions.

Equity-centered messages were prevalent throughout, framing tackling climate change in schools and classrooms as a way to begin to remedy environmental injustices in Maryland. The common value held by climate justice groups in the area was recognizing the impact of climate change and demanding immediate action.

Listen to student voices and mobilize alongside them.

School district leadership, advocacy organizations and student organizers supported students in their quest for greener schools, and they used creative approaches to bring as many young voices into the conversation as possible. **MoCo Students for Change** activated their networks to deliver hundreds of students to testify, march, comment, post and make their voices heard, ultimately delivering the school board a **climate action brief**. The recommendations in this brief were adopted, almost in their entirety, in the draft policy. School district leadership supported the students' efforts, including hosting a virtual Earth Day Symposium and a Climate Action Town Hall that delivered mandatory service hours and attracted more than 400 participants.

“One of the special things about [our student activism organization] is that we can take a controversial stance because we aren't beholden to the county, the state or any other constituency but our peers.”

Understand stakeholders' starting points, and craft communications from there.

School district leaders gathered data at multiple points to understand what students, parents and others knew about the district's current sustainability practices. Many survey participants were unaware of green schools initiatives, or of how science lessons in early grades set the foundation for climate change education in middle or high school. The district learned that more intentional communications around MCPS's sustainability work could both inform and garner more support for the new policy, so they lead a series of 30+ webinars with affinity groups such as principals, building supervisors, student governments, the Black and Brown Coalition, all the unions, the Parent-Teacher Association, county sustainability staff, parents and others to shape the policy and build buy-in before it went up for a vote.

Find a passionate advocate on the school board.

Lynne Harris had been a public school teacher and former president of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) for many years and was running for a seat on the school board while the County Climate Action plan was coming together. Because of her previous connections in the community, she had a large student network working on sustainability initiatives. Harris became chair of the fiscal management committee and kept sustainability at the forefront of board agendas once she was elected. Her role as a conduit between students and the board's fiscal management was a critical piece of getting a policy in place that aligned with student and parent demands.

Messaging

The most consistent messages (not in priority order) used across multiple media and with multiple stakeholders

Legislators must guarantee the right to clean air, water and a stable climate as a human right.

There is an urgent need for MCPS to take action to address the climate crisis — NOW.

As the county's largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions and the operator of the nation's eighth largest bus fleet, **MCPS must lead the way to a greener future.**

Greening MCPS' schools will promote racial and economic justice by providing prevailing-wage jobs to workers from low-income communities of color within Montgomery County on all MCPS-funded work.

Infusing climate change education throughout the K-12 curriculum will give students the foundational knowledge they need to meet Maryland's environmental literacy standards and graduation requirements.

Climate change cannot be addressed by individual actions alone; MCPS as an institution has to take action.

Words matter: Saying sustainability instead of energy conservation more accurately reflects the board's broader goals. Framing the issue as the need for *climate justice* and *energy democracy*, not just *climate action* keeps the focus on equity, particularly in the students' messaging.

Stakeholders

Key audiences engaged in the development, approval and implementation of the standards

Student advocacy groups

Educational advocacy groups

MCPS School Board members

Montgomery County Department of Sustainability and Compliance

School district unions

Students and parents

Communications Lessons Learned

What might other jurisdictions do to advance climate change education in their area?

Prioritize intergenerational organizing.

The pressure applied by student organizing groups around climate action, coupled with the county's prioritization of the same goals, made for an aggressive policy. Add to that the presence of a student board member who pushed for metrics and targets for long-term accountability, and the policy better reflected the community it serves.

Partner with and empower the students.

Students from student governments and outside advocacy groups were heard, listened to, and able to take the lead in webinars and town halls and through a seat on the school board. Use multiple methods to reach and mobilize student advocates, meet on asynchronous learning days or weekends, and offer service hours for their participation.

Present a united front.

Partnering messengers from both curriculum and facilities in public communications communicated how climate change education can be infused throughout the district on multiple levels, for student and community benefit.

Make sure communications at the school level are robust and clear.

Parents in particular need to see how the environmental literacy lessons in K-12 build on each other and are infused throughout multiple disciplines, and why. Communicating back to student advocates about how their actions directly informed policy is also pivotal for organizers.



Market what you already have (such as green roofs or composting in schools): put up signs!

Build awareness around what you are already doing to raise support for the larger work you want and need to do.



Work to reach every member of the community — especially the hard-to-reach ones.

Encourage people to ask questions and be part of the work.

Conclusion

(ending where you might begin)

There is no one-size-fits-all model for advancing climate change education. Each successful campaign — although it may be built on best practices from other districts — reflects the culture and priorities of an individual community and creates a bespoke policy.

The most successful communications strategies are those that arise from a deep understanding of the audiences they need to reach and clearly articulate what their creators want those stakeholders to do. The people behind such strategies know what those audiences value, where to reach them, the media that influence them and the messages most likely to resonate. From there, advocates can craft tactical plans to reach and influence audiences who can advance climate change education policies and practices.

Against that backdrop, we recommend that advocates looking to advance new (or expand existing) policies for climate change education start with assessing these critical questions:

- 1. Is there an existing climate plan in place at the state, county or district level?**
Look here for ways to frame climate change education as an accelerator of these plans and goals.
- 2. What audiences do you need to bring into the conversation, ask for help, vote, fund or otherwise make the policy a reality?** Map your stakeholders, learn where and how to reach them, and tailor messaging accordingly.
- 3. Are other organizations, student groups, activists, and district leaders already advocating for your same values?** Tap into existing networks to see where you can build consensus and then momentum.

From there, a new climate change education policy initiative will have a solid foundation for both policy development and communications strategy. The organizers documented in these case studies brought an inspiring sense of urgency, passion and persistence to their work, but never lost sight of the common goal: making sure the policy they were fighting for was right-sized to their community's needs. In your own endeavors to promote climate education policy, we wish you the best and thank you for all that you are doing for students, your community, and for the planet.

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Resources

New Jersey

“New Jersey’s 2020 Student Learning Standards Update: A Case Study of Climate Change Education,” by Julia Turner, Jingxian Bao and Margaret Wang / SubjectToClimate and Dr. Lauren Madden / The College of New Jersey.

“Report on K-12 Climate Change Education Needs in New Jersey,” by Dr. Lauren Madden (February 2022).

New Jersey Climate Change Education Hub.

“One state mandates teaching climate change in all subjects, even P.E.,” Hechinger Report, 5 November 2022.

Maine

NBEC’s Climate Education Policy’s landing page: features a **one-pager call to action**, several op-eds in support of the bill, the full text of the bill, webinars and other updates.

“Lawmakers approve \$2 million in funding to expand climate education in Maine schools,” Maine Public Radio, 27 April 2022.

Montgomery County, Maryland

June 28, 2023 MCPS Board Meeting discussing the ECA Sustainability policy and then the unanimous vote.

Student advocacy brief from Montgomery County Students for Change.

“Montgomery County Public Schools adopts transformative sustainability policy,” My Green Montgomery, 14 June 2022.