

March 9, 2021

Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona
United States Department of Education
Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington DC 2020

RE: Group Letter of Support for Naming a Climate Leader in the Department of Education

Dear Secretary Cardona,

Congratulations on your confirmation, and thank you for stepping up to lead during this unprecedented, existential moment for our nation's public schools. The centrality of public schools to the safety, health, and development of our children and the prosperity of our communities has never been so clear. We believe that the purposes of schools are to improve students' lives and to prepare them to shape the future. In this moment, the climate crisis and resulting social inequities are both a present threat to our children and the greatest problems we are leaving our children to solve.

We, the undersigned education, environmental, community, sustainability, business, and clean energy leaders, write to recommend that we lay the groundwork for future action by naming climate and environmental justice as a priority area for the Department and create a new position reporting directly to the Secretary with a mandate to lead and coordinate the Department's climate work. **If America is going to tackle the climate crisis and make the transition to clean energy, we need climate-resilient schools and future-ready students.**

Being smart on climate isn't *another* job for the K-12 sector. Building students' understanding of the drivers of Earth's rapidly changing climate and solutions to ensure the continued viability of human life is core to schools' educational mission in the 21st century. The crisis demands we bring a climate-lens to the current recovery work to leverage the technology, the financing, and the clean energy expertise that exists — combined with administrator and educator know-how — to improve our public schools. Even as we contend with COVID-19, ignoring climate in our schools will cost more money, decrease resilience, add to our public health problems, and widen inequities.

We understand that you have been charged with supporting schools to reopen safely and to navigate their urgent fiscal challenges. Rebuilding and rethinking our schools in the wake of COVID-19 is an opportunity to provide leadership that supports students and educators during and beyond the pandemic and fiscal crisis for schools. Specific to this moment, there is an opportunity to provide clear and actionable guidance and technical assistance to schools around indoor air quality, cost-effective use of outdoor spaces¹, and addressing budget shortfalls through energy savings.

¹ The [National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative](#), launched in June 2020, has already created an extensive library of resources for district and site leaders to use to support the safe return of students to schools during the pandemic.

Climate change is a generational issue, and our youth know it. Despite the groundswell of youth action on climate², the education sector — in other words: students, teachers, administrators, school board members, and the physical spaces in which they learn — is often overlooked in government planning on climate.³ The Biden-Harris Administration must leave as its legacy a Department of Education that is leading on climate and environmental justice and guided by youth voices. **A first and critical step is to name a climate leader in the Department of Education reporting directly to the Secretary.** This action will send a powerful signal to states, education leaders, and the private sector that schools have an essential role to play in addressing climate change.⁴ The climate leader will ensure we have future climate, clean energy, and environmental justice leaders in every sector and from all backgrounds by:

- **Ensuring the Department supports educators and schools to prepare young people to shape a healthy, sustainable, and more equitable future.** Schools are living laboratories that — with intentional, relevant curriculum in core subjects and career technical education industry sectors — can help students develop the needed mindsets and skills to prepare for high-wage careers shaping our sustainable future.
- **Championing climate and environmental justice.** After years of injustice, frontline communities deserve disproportionate investment to mitigate the impacts of climate change and to prepare students for careers in the clean energy economy.
- **Ensuring robust, cross-agency action to prepare youth to lead the clean energy transition** including implications for the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Higher Education Act, workforce development, career technical education, climate and environmental literacy, Next Generation Science Standards, and education’s role at COP26 in November 2021.
- **Addressing climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience in school facilities and transportation.** Our schools, as the second-largest sector of public infrastructure after roads and highways with a carbon footprint equivalent to 18 coal-fired power plants, must play their part in mitigating emissions. School buildings offer an opportunity to showcase climate mitigation strategies in communities across America. Moreover, schools must adapt to the climate change impacts which have and will continue to disrupt school operations and learning. Lastly, schools, as potential centerpieces to community resilience plans, have the opportunity to serve communities in new and critical ways.
- **Bringing a sustainability lens to rethinking and reopening school in the wake of COVID-19.** Schools need permission and support to aim for something even more effective than new HVAC systems —

² The Sunrise Movement is the most visible among these efforts in the US. [And the youth climate strike of September 2019 reached all 50 states.](#)

³ A [2015 report](#) by the Congressional Research Service found that almost 40 federal departments and agencies had undertaken some level of planning related to climate change adaptation. The Dept of Education was not one of them. The [Climate 21 Project](#), written from the perspective of 150 individuals with government experience, makes recommendations for a whole-of-government response to climate and has specific recommendations for 11 federal departments or agencies. The Dept of Education was not explicitly included. At the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) in Madrid, participating nations were not asked to make commitments for the role of their public education systems in addressing climate change. Lastly, at your own confirmation hearing, you did not receive a single question from Senators about the Department of Education’s potentially transformative role in the Biden Administration’s all-of-government response to the climate crisis.

⁴ As Kay and Shultz note in their review of the lessons learned from past efforts among federal agencies to mobilize climate change action, when [USAID]’s leadership said “climate change is among the greatest global challenges of our generation,” it rallied those in the agency who were charged with implementation. See ICF’s [“Opportunities to enhance federal government climate resilience”](#).

teaching in the open air! The risk of virus transmission is roughly 20 times lower outdoors than indoors. We know from research and experience that expanding the classroom into outdoor spaces, both on and off school grounds, will address academic, health and economic needs — during this pandemic and long after. Spending time outdoors is critical to students’ intellectual, physical, and mental well-being.

The climate leader would have input and influence across the organization, leveraging all relevant programs to drive environmental justice, climate literacy, and high performing, climate smart, green school buildings outcomes. The climate leader would also have a role in guiding the work of an office of school facilities, office of green, healthy schools, or office of climate literacy and jobs training, as has been proposed by advocates. The climate leader would serve as a key point person for the NGO community, the Hill, and other agencies on existing and future proposals. There is much that can get done through leadership and authorities that already exist. There is even more that can be done by ensuring that legislation on infrastructure, national service, workforce development, career and technical education, science, social science and health education, and teacher professional learning is *climate aware* at the least, and even better, *climate ambitious* to make the most of the moment. We are under no illusions that naming a climate leader is *the* solution; rather naming a climate leader is a powerful rallying step for all stakeholders to organize and embrace the work we must do together to address this climate emergency.

We are eager to support you to ensure the Department of Education and K-12 community are not just at the table, but are in fact leading on climate and equity as we support our schools to reopen and recover from COVID-19. Again, we are grateful for your leadership and would be happy to assist with the work of shaping the climate leader’s role, engaging coalition partners, and identifying candidates.

If you have any questions about the content or recommendations in this letter, please contact Jonathan Klein (jonathan@undauntedpartners.com).

Sincerely,

Organizations

Alliance for Climate Education
American Federation of Teachers
American Geophysical Union
American Institute of Biological Sciences
Arlington Public Schools
Association for Environmental
and Outdoor Education
Association of Young Americans
Bay Region, California Community Colleges
Captain Planet Foundation
Carson City School District

Center for Green Schools at the U.S. Green
Buildings Council
Chispa League of Conservation Voters
CMTA
Concordia
DeKalb Kids Project, Inc.
Earthday.org
EcoRise
enVerid Systems
Envirolution
Florida Conservation Voters
Generation180

Global Choices	Partners in School Innovation
Global GreenSTEM	Philadelphia Energy Authority
Green Generation	Project Drawdown
Green Schools National Network	School Board Partners
Hispanic Access Foundation	Schools for Climate Action
Inclusive Prosperity Capital	Sierra Club
International WELL Building Institute	Silicon Schools Fund
Jones Whitsett Architects	Strategic Energy Innovations
Lawrence Hall of Science	Teach For All
National Parent Teacher Association	Ten Strands
National Wildlife Federation	The Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education
New Buildings Institute	TreePeople
Oak Park Unified School District	UndauntedK12
Oakland EcoBlock Project	Zero Hour
	350 Roaring Fork, Colorado

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