

Dear Legislators,

I write in heart-felt support of SB 854, Comprehensive Climate Education, as a member of the Oregon Educators for Climate Education (OECE) Steering committee, an Assistant Professor in Education Studies and Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon, a teacher educator, a former middle/high school science teacher, and a mom of an elementary student in an Oregon public school.

SB 854 has been a crowd-sourced effort, for teachers and students, by teachers, at the request of students. Urged by their students to make climate change something that is considered across grades and disciplines, I have witnessed weekly over the past two years the OECE team dedicate countless hours from their free time to organize and thoughtfully craft a bill that speaks to the requests of students. Our OECE team, a small group of dedicated volunteers, has spent the last two years carefully thinking, discussing, and facilitating listening sessions around this bill's creation with countless Oregon stakeholders.

There is dire need for this bill. An Oregon Health Authority study, released in the summer 2022, outlines the ways in which Oregon youth are experiencing climate anxiety.

<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/HEALTHYENVIRONMENTS/CLIMATECHANGE/Pages/Mental-Health-Effects.aspx> Indeed, I have noticed a marked uptick in my own students at the UO worrying about climate change, particularly after the Labor Day 2020 fires affected so many of them so deeply.

As a teacher educator and researcher of climate change education, I spend much of my life teaching, talking, and communicating about climate change within the education world. I even created a course at the University of Oregon entitled Teaching for Climate Activism, which aims to prepare future teachers for teaching about climate change in ways that instill hope and action in their students. My students tell me that after focusing an entire term on climate change, they leave the course feeling vastly more hopeful and informed than they did before.

This is what climate education can do. Rather than fear-monger, it can help address climate anxiety young people are expressing by giving them tools to understand the impacts, solutions, and ways to adapt and steward better changes in our communities, state, and world. My students tell me that from media they tend to hear messages of gloom and doom, but talking about the issues in class and thinking through potential possible solutions combats the typically one-sided messaging they hear informally.

As a researcher, I have published about the need for framing climate change education around social justice, as climate change disproportionately impacts already marginalized communities, exacerbating existing structural oppressions. The OECE team has explicitly included within the creation of SB 854 much recognition and hope for the ways that this bill can support and buttress both HB2845, Ethnic Studies education in social studies, and SB13, Tribal History/Shared History.

Our vision of climate education in SB 854 is absolutely not an “add-on” for teachers. This bill was written by teachers; we are well-aware of the challenges and constraints teachers face. Rather, this bill calls for teachers to include climate considerations in work they already do, units they already teach, in ways that more deeply consider Oregon contexts and needs, and in ways that help support more relevant, timely education that helps students prepare for responsible and informed stewardship of their communities and state.

As a teacher educator, I include a focus on climate education in all of my classes with aspiring teachers at the University of Oregon. And, as a former high school environmental science teacher, I have also taught about climate change at the high school level. In the 15+ years I have been teaching about climate change, I have never received pushback from students, parents, or administrators. However, I often see future teachers worry about this possibility. By passing SB 854, legislators will signal to teachers that they are supported to do this essential and important work without feeling like they are endeavoring in it alone. And, as a teacher educator, I will continue to support teachers to do this work and hope to expand this work with the passage of SB 854. In fact, through the Environment Initiative, the University of Oregon is actively preparing to expand our curriculum in environmental and climate education.

Finally, as a mom of a young elementary child in an Oregon public school, I can speak to my deepest sense of fear and worry for my child’s future, his generation’s future, and the future of generations of children yet to come. That they might not have a livable future because of the failure of previous generations is an unthinkable injustice.

I am working to do everything I possibly can, every day, in my professional and personal life to alleviate and address climate change. I tell my students that we already have the knowledge, technology, and capacity to mitigate and adapt to climate change. We have simply lacked the political will to do so. Our role in this as educators is very clear: to help support awareness, knowledge, and social will so that we can move the societal needle toward a just and livable future.

As lawmakers, your responsibility to future generations is also enormous. You have the power to make a difference. This is one of those defining moments. Please support SB 854, Comprehensive Climate Education. In doing so, you will signal to Oregon youth that you hear them and take their concerns for a just and livable future seriously.

Thank you for your consideration, your time, and your service.

Best,
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