

Introduction

Why We Need Climate Justice Education

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In the accelerating chaos of summer 2025, it is tempting to surrender to the inevitability of the futures we dread. It is easy to extrapolate a future that emerges from alliances between billionaires and autocrats; a future of technofeudalist overlords enserfing humanity in cyber fiefdoms; or a future in which “market forces” bleed the Earth dry of anything that can be commodified. With the uncanny second coming of the President that had (twice) withdrawn the U.S. from the Paris Agreement, it is easy to quote Yeats’ lines about things falling apart: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity.” In short, it is easy to forget that the future is yet undetermined.

This remembering is only the first step. It forces us to confront the real question: what will you do to craft a future you want to see for yourself and your loved ones? Do you have the courage to name that dream and keep it alive? It will take tremendous courage indeed. One of the best novels yet to imagine a transition to an ecological civilization is Nick Fuller Googins’ *The Great Transition* (2023). At one point, a teenage wildfire survivor is asked by an older friend: “The world’s ending but it’s not over yet. What’re you planning to do with the freedom you still got?” When Larch shrugs in response, Dr. Alex offers the following suggestion:

Time to start figuring it out... Because you got a future. A good one. I can see that. Anyone can see that. But you got to work for it. That’s why you need to help out. Not for me. Not for those other[s]... down there. For you. I’m telling you, my dude. Helping—it’s the only thing that helps. Be part of something. Join a team. It’s the most human thing we can do. It’s in our DNA. It’s how we shed our skins. Might not be the only way, but it’s a good way (p. 77).

This is the choice we have today. This is the choice declared by [89% of the world's population](#) who care about climate and want to see decisive action taken by governments on securing livable futures. The [89% Project](#) is a partnership between *The Guardian*, *Agence France-Presse* and dozens of other news organizations across the world. We, too, can choose to be part of something. Since January 2025, the new administration has taken aggressive steps to dismantle all climate action and policies, defund climate research, and hobble federal agencies including NASA, EPA and others. The National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration's 2024 guide to Climate Literacy was scrubbed from government sites—its metadata remains, but attempting to access it [results in a "Page Not Found" message](#) and redirects to the CLEAN network. Thousands of scientists, research personnel, conservation workers, National Park Service personnel and other staff essential for studying and protecting the Earth system have been laid off or placed on indefinite leaves. Coupled with the government's invective to cease all activities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, is the attack on the Department of Education. This includes projects carried out under the auspices of the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

On April 4, the Center for Climate Literacy received a note of termination for the NEH-funded Teaching Climate Justice with Young People's Literatures and Media summer institute for K-12 teachers. The three-week institute was planned for June and July 2025. The goal was to provide twenty-four teachers with an opportunity to develop a literature-based, theory-informed, actionable understanding of climate justice for the ELA classroom. Participants would design lesson plans, activities, and learn how to use young people's narratives and media as portals into exploring climate justice issues.

The focus on climate justice—defined as considerations of climate change vulnerability relative to responsibility—was central for two reasons. First, climate justice is the most efficient strategy to reckon with the violence against the planet and its peoples that have shaped ideologies, practices, and institutions responsible for ushering in the climate emergency. Second, climate justice is a key framework for envisioning transformational change for planetary and human health. Since 2022, when the UN General Assembly declared that access to a clean environment is a universal human right (United Nations, 2022), the achievement of climate justice has been acknowledged as one of the biggest structural challenges for solving the climate crisis. This is why a consideration of climate justice was included in the 2022 IPCC Sixth Assessment report. This is why, for the first time ever, an entire chapter on climate justice was featured in the 2023 Fifth National Climate Assessment (USGCRP, 2023). The importance of climate justice will only grow in the years ahead. We were not surprised when we received over 150 applications from all over the country.

When the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) shuttered the offices of National Endowment for the Humanities, we were told that “the termination of your grant represents an urgent priority for the administration”—or, rather, that climate literacy education no

longer aligns with the “needs and priorities” of the federal agencies. There will be no federal support for education that empowers teachers, students, and communities to adapt and thrive in a climate-changing world. Instead, as we learn each day, there will be more support for protecting fossil fuel interests. On April 8, under the auspices of “unleashing American energy,” the President signed an executive order that will limit states’ ability to “...sue energy companies for supposed ‘climate change’ harm under nuisance or other tort regimes” (White House, 2025). The United States Secretary of Energy, Chris Wright, the former CEO of Liberty Energy—North America's second largest fracking company—expresses the administration's deeper feelings toward the climate movement, calling it “sinister” (Lustgarten, 2025). Lee Zeldin, the current administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, has orchestrated a near complete rollback of climate regulations. “Today is the greatest day of deregulation our nation has seen,” Zeldin said when announcing the initiative. “*We are driving a dagger straight into the heart of the climate change religion* to drive down cost of living for American families, unleash American energy, bring auto jobs back to the U.S. and more” (EPA, 2025, emphasis ours). Both Zeldin and Wright’s denial of the climate crisis’s severity is in direct contradiction to previous positions, including during their confirmation hearings.

We launched this special issue because we believe that conversations about climate justice are essential. The accelerating climate crisis cannot be cancelled by an administrative decision. We believe that climate justice education is critical to support young people’s right to livable futures. We are committed to this fight because at stake, really, is everyone’s future. We are also committed because, as teachers, it is our duty to empower young people to develop the values and capabilities they need to design the just, green, regenerative, and sustainable world we all want to see. We are committed to do so together. This is what climate justice is all about.

Climate Literacy in Education was launched in 2022 with a mission to promote resources, materials, ideas, and questions for the teaching of climate literacy as a transdisciplinary capacity. As we have endeavored to do in our five issues so far, this approach broadens the meaning of climate literacy beyond a strictly scientific knowledge to a socioscientific and cultural competence. Crucially, it operates through considerations of climate justice.

This issue collects the voices of teachers and educators, applicants to the cancelled Institute, in response to the question: “Why do we need climate justice education”? It is also the first completely anonymous issue of *CLE*, which the editorial collective opted to do to ensure the teacher contributors remain safe. While deidentified, the voices ring out. They offer us actually taught curriculum, student perspectives, poetic reflections, and demands. We hope these voices will help clarify the need for education that provides students with the contexts and skills necessary to understand climate justice as 1) an essential framework for addressing the socioeconomic, ideological, and other drivers of the climate emergency, and 2) a strategic solution, whose application to considerations of climate change impacts, burdens, and futures is necessary to ensure a just transition to an ecological civilization.

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