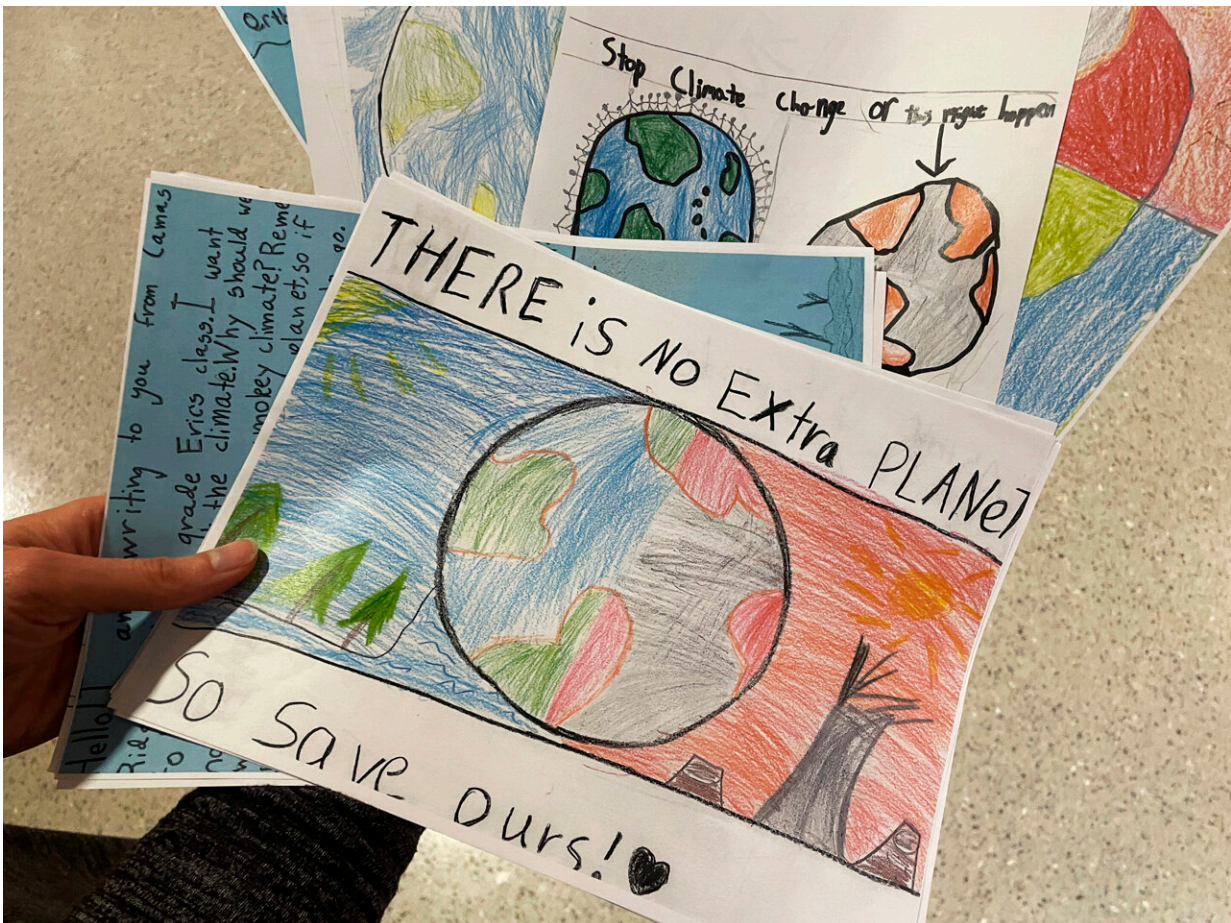


# Oregon eyes mandate for climate change lessons in schools

March 12 2023, by Claire Rush



Sarah Stapleton, a University of Oregon education professor, holds drawings and letters from elementary school students asking lawmakers to stop climate change, after testifying at a hearing at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem, Ore., Thursday, March 9, 2023, in favor of a bill that would require climate change instruction in public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush

Oregon lawmakers are aiming to make the state the second in the nation to mandate climate change lessons for K-12 public school students, further fueling U.S. culture wars in education.

Dozens of Oregon high schoolers submitted support of the bill, saying they care about [climate change](#) deeply. Some teachers and parents say teaching climate change could help the [next generation](#) better confront it, but others want schools to focus on reading, writing and math after [test scores](#) plummeted post-pandemic.

Schools across the U.S. have found themselves at the center of a politically charged battle over curriculum and how matters such as gender, sex education and race should be taught—or whether they should be taught at all.

One of the bill's chief sponsors, Democratic Sen. James Manning, said even [elementary students](#) have told him climate change is important to them.

"We're talking about third and fourth graders having a vision to understand how this world is changing rapidly," he said at a Thursday state Capitol hearing in Salem.

Connecticut has the only U.S. state law requiring climate change instruction, and it's possibly the first time such a bill has been introduced in Oregon, according to legislative researchers. Lawmakers in California and New York are considering similar bills.

Manning's bill requires every Oregon [school](#) district to develop climate change curriculum within three years, addressing ecological, societal, cultural, political and mental health aspects of climate change.

It's unclear how Oregon would enforce the law. Manning told The Associated Press that he is going to scrap an unpopular proposal for financial penalties against districts that don't comply, but didn't say whether another plan was coming.

For now, the bill doesn't say how many hours of instruction are needed for the state's [education department](#) to approve a district's curriculum.

Most states have learning standards—largely set by state education boards—that include climate change, although their extent varies by state. Twenty states and Washington, D.C., have specifically adopted what are known as the Next Generation Science Standards, which call for middle schoolers to learn about [climate science](#) and [high schoolers](#) to receive lessons on how [human activity](#) affects the climate.

New Jersey's education standards are believed to be the most wide-ranging. For the first time this [school year](#), climate change is not just part of science instruction, but all subjects, like art, English and even PE.

Several teens testified at the state Capitol in favor of the bill. No students have submitted opposition testimony.

"In 100 years are we going to have to teach our children what trees are because there aren't any left? It's a thought that horrifies me," said high school sophomore Gabriel Burke. "My generation needs to learn about climate change from a young age for our survival."

Some teachers testified in support of the bill. But others say they're already struggling to address pandemic learning losses. Adding climate change on top of reading, writing, math, science and social studies is "a heavy lift that will end up coming down on the backs of teachers," said Kyler Pace, a grade school teacher in Sherwood, Oregon.

Recent surveys conducted by Columbia University's Teachers College and the Yale Program on Climate Communication suggest that a majority of Americans think that climate change and global warming should be taught in school. But climate change is still seen by some as a politically divisive issue, and Pace said that mandating its instruction could inject more tension into schools.

Nicole De Graff, a self-described parents' rights advocate and former GOP legislative candidate, testified that her children, ages 9, 15, and 16, are "done being overwhelmed with things that are fear-based, like COVID."

In Pennington, New Jersey, wellness teacher Suzanne Horsley aims for age-appropriate lessons on what can be a daunting topic. In her K-2 [physical education classes](#) at Toll Gate Grammar School, she plays a game with pretend trees, using bean bags representing carbon to show students that fewer trees leads to higher levels of atmospheric carbon.

In Horsley's lesson plan for teens, students learn how [climate](#) change disproportionately impacts low-income communities. They look at air quality maps in areas with higher industrial activity or car traffic.

There is a push for students to feel as though they have some ability to influence their world, Horsley said. "Whether it's conserving water or finding ways to plant more trees or take care of the trees that already exist ... they want to feel empowered."

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