



Teaching the Truth About Climate Change Is Up to Us, Because Textbooks Lie

In May, *Science* magazine reported that the Trump administration eliminated NASA’s Carbon Monitoring System, which determines levels of heat-trapping carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere. Trump’s latest climate-denial maneuver is outrageous, but for years, school textbooks have taken a similar head-in-the-sand approach to climate change.

In 2016, the school board in Portland, Oregon, approved a comprehensive climate justice resolution, one part of which mandated that Portland Public Schools “will abandon the use of any adopted text material that is found to express doubt about the severity of the climate crisis or its root in human activities.”

BY BILL BIGELOW

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I was a member of the committee of parents, teachers, students, and activists that pushed for the resolution. In drafting it, we knew that there were a couple of especially egregious texts in Portland classrooms, but until we sat down to formally evaluate 13 middle and high school science and social studies textbooks, we had no idea that every single one of the texts adopted in famously green and liberal Portland misleads young people about the climate crisis.

Few teachers put their faith in multinational behemoths like Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. But our Climate Justice Committee needed more than hunches about how these corporations’ profit-first orientation would distort their coverage of climate change — we needed evidence.

Before our committee collected district-adopted textbooks to evaluate, we developed a rubric to evaluate their adequacy, inspired by the work of K. C.

Busch at Stanford’s Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. Here’s what we came up with:

- The text provides stories and examples that help students grasp the immediacy, systemic nature, and gravity of the climate crisis.
- The text includes actions that people are taking to address the climate crisis, locally and worldwide.
- The text emphasizes that all people are being affected by the climate crisis, but also highlights the inequitable effects of the crisis on certain groups (e.g., Indigenous peoples, people in poverty, Pacific Islanders, people in sub-Saharan Africa, people dependent on glaciers for drinking water and irrigation, etc.)
- The text does not use conditional language that expresses doubt about the climate crisis (e.g., “Some scientists believe . . .” or “Human activities may change climate . . .”)
- There are discussion and/or writing questions that provoke critical thinking.

Given our climate emergency, meeting these criteria seemed to us to be a reasonable cut score.

Thirteen retired teachers and members of our Portland Public Schools Climate Justice Committee gathered to evaluate the school district’s texts. The first thing we noticed is how difficult it was to find anything about climate change in many of the books. A typical social studies text, *History Alive! Pursuing American Ideals*, includes no mention of climate change, but offers breathless paeans to fossil fuels: “Oklahoma’s oil reserves are among the largest in the nation. Fossil fuels helped the United States become an industrial giant.” As one committee

reviewer wrote, in this and other texts, “there is an opportunity to look at early U.S. history as prologue to the climate crisis, but this book is utterly silent.”

Contemporary Economics: not a word. The iconic *Magruder’s American Government*: 844 pages with no refer-

Placement text *Sources of the Western Tradition* includes anything about climate change — as if we can cleave fossil fuel-powered industrialization from its contemporary climate consequences.

Other texts acknowledge the existence, or at least the possibility, of cli-

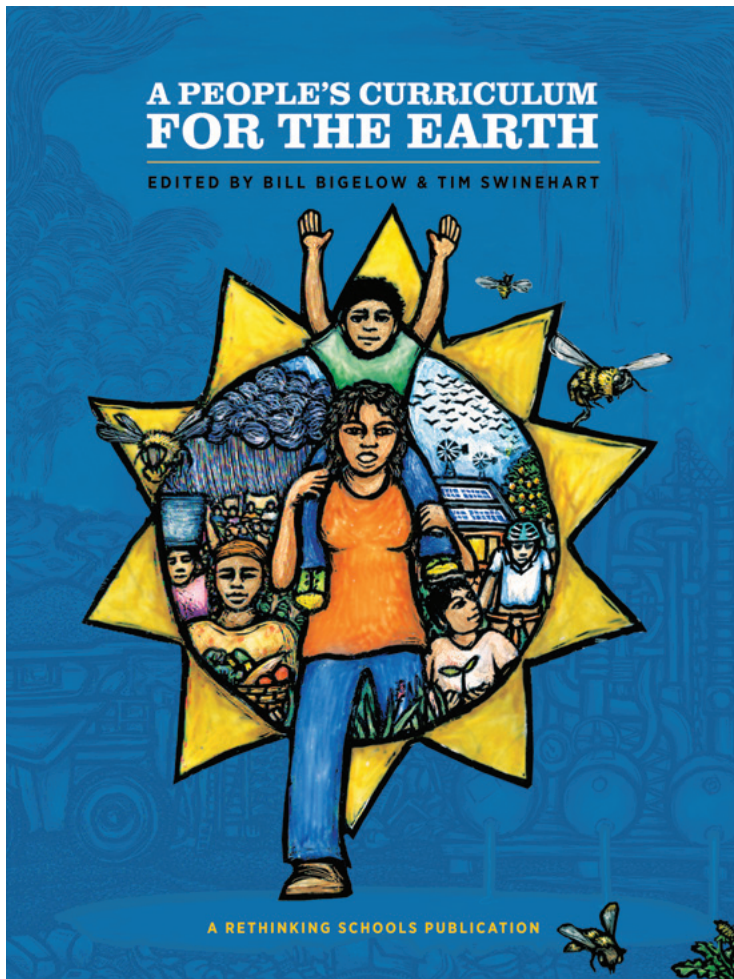


ence to global warming, climate change, greenhouse gases. One committee reviewer wrote: “How can a book about the U.S. government say nothing about the climate crisis — or environmental policy more broadly? This is egregious, unacceptable.” Despite a focus on industrialization, neither volume of the Advanced

mate change, but the texts’ language is drenched in doubt. *Issues and Life Sciences* describes global climate change in just one sentence, as a “potential threat to Earth’s biomes.” However, other “threats” to the Earth’s biomes — eight of them — are listed as actual, and climate change a mere potential threat.

This lesson comes from the Rethinking Schools book, *A People's Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis*. The book includes more than 80 additional environmental justice lessons and student-friendly readings, for elementary through college. Go to www.rethinkingschools.org/earth to see the table of contents and to read the book's introduction.

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“To really confront the climate crisis, we need to think differently, build differently, and teach differently. *A People's Curriculum for the Earth* is an educator's toolkit for our times.”

NAOMI KLEIN

author of *The Shock Doctrine* and *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*

“This volume is a marvelous example of justice in ALL facets of our lives—civil, social, educational, economic and, yes, environmental. Bravo to the Rethinking Schools team for pulling this collection together and making us think more holistically about what we mean when we talk about justice.”

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS

Kellner Family Chair in Urban Education
University of Wisconsin-Madison

“This is the kind of book that can change the way young people look at everything.”

MAUREEN COSTELLO

Director of Teaching Tolerance



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