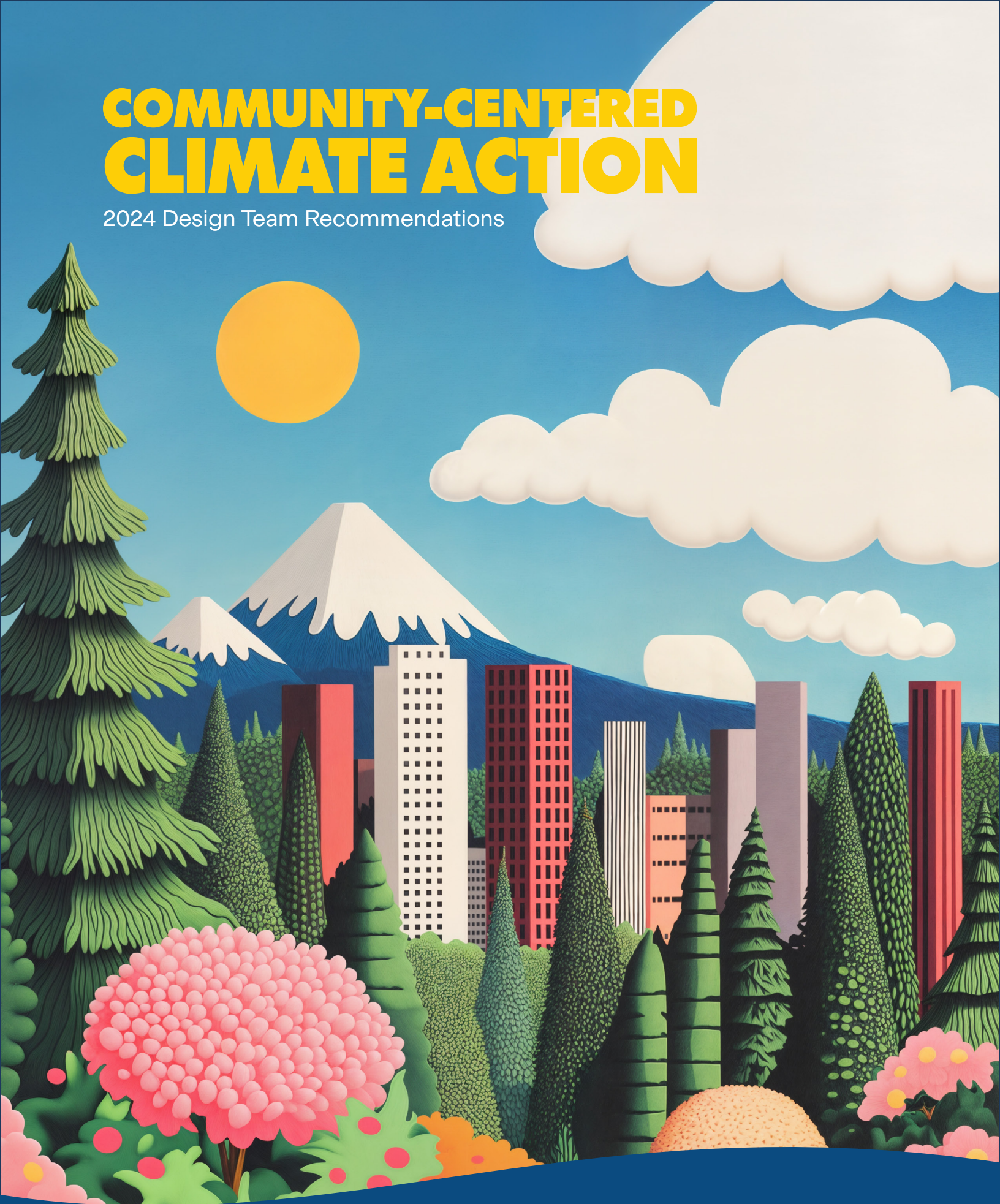


# COMMUNITY-CENTERED CLIMATE ACTION

2024 Design Team Recommendations



PORTLAND | **Public Schools**

“

**TIME AND AGAIN, WE SEE KIDS WHO ARE WHO ARE REALLY PASSIONATE ABOUT *CLIMATE ACTION*, AND FOR WHOM IT BECOMES KIND OF A LIFE CHANGING, SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE THAT SHAPES THEIR IDENTITY, THAT BUILDS THEIR CONFIDENCE AND THEIR ABILITY TO MAKE CHANGE, THAT BUILDS THEIR TRUST IN THEIR COMMUNITY'S ABILITY TO RESPOND POSITIVELY TO THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND CLIMATE INJUSTICE.**

- Eco-School Network Interview

# CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to everyone who participated in this process. We could not have done this without you. And a huge thank you to all the students, staff, and community members who agreed to take time to answer questions, respond to surveys, and invite Design Team members into their schools to observe your communities.

## DESIGN TEAM MEMBERS

### PPS STUDENTS:

Althea Baumgardner, Cleveland HS

Eesa Taylor, Ida B. Wells HS

Ruby Kimball, Ida B. Wells HS

### PPS SCHOOL-SITE STAFF:

Anthwony Aceves, teacher at McDaniel HS

Alex Bennett, teacher at Whitman ES

Chrisinna Ivosevic, teacher at Alliance HS

Jessica Murchison, CTE TOSA

Joshua Kanagy, Qualified Mental Health Professional at Roosevelt HS

Tim Swinehart, teacher at Lincoln HS

### PUBLIC PARTNERS:

City of Portland, Harmonie Dashiell

PCC Environmental Center, Peter Ritson

### PPS STAFF:

Safe Routes to School, Shane Nevius

### COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION PARTNERS:

African Youth & Community Organization, Ahmed Ali

Bird Alliance of Oregon, Micah Meskel

Black Parent Initiative, Stephanie Harvey

CETI, Nandini Ranganathan

Coalition of Black Men, Jesse Rogers

Eco-School Network, Amy Higgs

Energy Trust of Oregon, Kathleen Belkhatat

Grow Portland, Max Krieger

Growing Gardens, Amoreena Guerrero and Carla Manuel

I Am We Advocacy, Elias Moreno-Lothe

Making Earth Cool, Sarah Baker and Shawn Creeden

NAYA Family Center, Lucy Suppah

Neighbors for Clean Air, Nakisha Nathan and Oscar Edwards-Hughes

Our Streets, Josh Bowman

Rhythm Seed Farm, Nick Canino

Senior Advocates for Generational Equity, Britt Christiaansen

## PPS CLIMATE JUSTICE DESIGN TEAM FACILITATORS:

Kat Davis, Climate Justice Advisor

Ari Ettinger, Climate Resiliency Program Manager

Rosie Goity, AmeriCorps member

Jesse Nienow-Macke, AmeriCorps member

Hannah Skutt, AmeriCorps member

Anita Spaeth, AmeriCorps member

## SPECIAL THANKS TO PPS INNOVATION STUDIO STAFF SUPPORT:

Camille Idedevbo, Director, Innovation Studio

Immanuel Harice, Business Operations, Innovation Studio



# INTRODUCTION

In Spring of 2024, the PPS Climate Justice department co-led a design process with the PPS Innovation Studio, Co-Creating Pathways for Student Leadership in Climate Action at PPS, with the goal of answering the overarching question:

**How might PPS create and support meaningful, accessible pathways to climate action, engagement opportunities, and community connection for our entire student body, especially students most affected by climate change?**

To help answer that question, PPS Climate Justice staff composed a diverse 30-person Design Team that included PPS students, teachers, staff, and partner organizations. Each participant on this Design Team embodied aspects of climate justice through different causes, communities served, and lived experiences. The Design Team engaged with the overarching question through interviews, focus groups, and observational study, seeking to understand the deeply held challenges, barriers to participation, and needs of the many different stakeholders that encompass the PPS ecosystem.

This process, designed by the PPS Innovation Studio, employs equity and empathy by putting the end user (PPS students, staff, and stakeholders) at the center of the inquiry. It is intended to identify solutions that are genuinely based on the needs and experiences of the stakeholders we serve, rather than settling for solutions that we as administrators, or even community partners, “assume” or “imagine” meet those needs. From this perspective, the Design Team embarked on a community-based research process to design prototypes of strategies and recommendations that PPS leadership can advance from designing directly with and for communities who experience barriers to advancing student support in climate action.

The outcome of this work is a series of best practices and prototypes of specific strategies to support our most underserved students and community members to thrive despite a changing climate. Understanding the real needs of the community is essential to creating climate solutions that promote racial equity and social justice. That’s why this report highlights not only the Design Team’s findings but also the process used to uncover them, emphasizing both the process and findings as equally important steps toward meaningful change.





At the heart of this work together, there is a clear call for enhanced transparency and accountability to further relationship-building and trust in order to develop the sustainable programs and support systems that our students deserve. The Design Team emphasizes that in order to foster long term buy-in and collaboration from the PPS community as these recommendations are refined, added to, and implemented, it will be critical to continue to show a commitment to deep engagement with our students, staff, and partners. At a high level, the Design Team found that across the district, our communities share the following needs:

- Equitable Access to Education and Resources
- Support for Mental Health, Student Agency, and Community Well-Being
- Sustained Collaboration and Capacity Building

While many of the recommendations to meet these needs require long term approaches to cultural change and program development, five outcomes from the Spring 2024 Design Team **inspired immediate action items** for the 2024-2025 school year:

1. Develop a PPS Climate Project Playbook
2. Make More Transparent Partnership Pathways for Community Stakeholders
3. Career and Technical Education & Curriculum Planning
4. Assess Opportunities for Integrated Climate Justice Curriculum
5. Charter a more focused Design Team to continue this work through deeper engagement with middle grades and underserved communities

In June, 2024, PPS welcomed a new Superintendent, Dr. Kimberly Armstrong, providing an opportunity to bring a new vision for how the district advances the mission of providing a high quality public education. Dr. Armstrong's first year priorities are: Building Trust and Relationships Across our City, Advance Literacy, and to Strengthen Safe, Supportive and Well-Maintained Schools. With new leadership and funding opportunities, the PPS Climate Justice Department advocates for an enhanced set of best practices for all student support services and community engagement informed by the findings from this design process. The Climate Justice Department will regularly expand on these best practices as iterative engagement and design research continues to deepen our understanding on how to best support our most underserved students in a climate-changed world.





## BACKGROUND

The Portland Public Schools' [Climate Crisis Response, Climate Justice, and Sustainable Practices Policy \(CCRP\)](#) commits the district to multi-faceted, ambitious goals to reduce the district's contribution to climate change and create a more equitable system that advances justice, health, and community empowerment through climate solutions and education.

Key to this policy is student voice and community partnership. In fact, the policy was brought to the PPS Board of Education in Fall 2019 by community members in partnership with students and teachers, launching a multi-year process of collaboration to land on the final iteration of the policy, officially adopted in March 2022. While key threads of the policy aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and minimize waste in all areas, it is arguably just as, if not more, important as an educational institution to consider: how the district approaches this work, who gets to participate in those decisions, and where this policy can weave in deeper education and project based learning for students and educators.

Since adopting the CCRP, the PPS Climate Justice Advisor (CJA) has focused on understanding the history and context of climate justice within the district. The PPS Graduate Portrait, developed collaboratively with the community, envisions graduates ready to tackle climate challenges in a greener future. Responding to student, teacher and community advocacy for climate education in 2016, the PPS Board adopted Resolution

#5272, which called for “curriculum and educational opportunities that address climate change and climate justice in all Portland Public Schools. The CCRP calls for engaging students with climate solutions both through the curriculum and through action opportunities outside the classroom. However, despite strong community interest and leadership support, there remains a lack of clarity on how to effectively integrate climate action into the already complex and underfunded framework of the district's priorities.

Through conversations with various stakeholders—including students, teachers, staff, board members, and community members—the CJA identified crucial insights for effective climate action within Portland Public Schools (PPS). The district has a rich history of passionate advocacy for climate initiatives, positioning it ahead of many others. However, there's a persistent challenge in linking climate action to educational outcomes like student achievement and health, often treated as separate priorities. To create a sustainable and impactful climate action strategy, it's vital to integrate these efforts into the district's overall mission, ensuring accountability and support for all involved. Moreover, the dominant narrative around climate action often marginalized voices from diverse backgrounds, which can widen the engagement gap. Moreover, many students feel overwhelmed by the scale and urgency of







climate change, leading to feelings of hopelessness and frustration. Empowering students with tangible ways to contribute can combat this pessimism, foster a sense of agency, and deepen engagement through the lens working towards a better future.

This research and reflection led to the development of a research question:

**How might PPS create and support meaningful, accessible pathways to climate action, engagement opportunities, and community connection for our entire student body, especially students most affected by climate change?**

Enter the PPS Innovation Studio, which guides innovative, community-informed, and equity-centered processes for designing solutions to complex problems in PPS that are directly informed by and serve those who need them most. The Innovation Studio and Climate Justice department began collaborating in summer 2023 to plan for the first Innovation Studio summit themed: “Productive Disruption” - a call to intentionally and thoughtfully disrupt the entrenched challenges within a large bureaucratic agency that prevent us from reaching community goals. This collaboration led to the creation of the PPS Climate Justice Design Team: Co-Creating Pathways for Student Leadership in Climate Action.

**Context of this Moment in Time**

With the CCRP in early strategic planning and development, the 2023-2024 school year was an optimal time for a deep engagement project to inform a community-driven program. At the time, a labor dispute was causing intense distrust between teachers, the district, and the community. This project was an opportunity to go through a community-centered process that could build trust on a small scale.

**There were two additional factors that made the timing of this project ideal:** First, the Climate Justice department had one-time funds which would expire July 1, 2024, the sole purpose of which was to develop the foundational work needed for the CCRP to launch and become systemically adopted. Without a guaranteed budget beyond July 2024, the ability to fund community-led insights to inform the next stage of strategic planning was determined a meaningful investment.

Second, the Portland City Council voted to approve the Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF) Climate Investment Plan (CIP), a clear and tangible way to immediately apply any insights that a community-led Design Team came to being. The PCEF CIP allocates funds to PPS for student-led climate projects, giving every K-8, middle school and high school \$15,000 for student-led projects every year for five years.



wThe student, teacher, community partner, and systemic outreach, engagement, and support needed to launch this program made our research question even more pressing. This research question no longer reflected a need for a theory of action, but had suddenly become a very tangible question we needed to answer in order to uplift a funded and substantial new student climate action program which would launch during the 2024-25 school year.

### **Innovation Studio Design Practice**

The Innovation Studio is committed to transforming Portland Public Schools through fresh, ambitious ideas that challenge the status quo. By focusing on long-standing barriers, particularly those affecting Black and Native students and staff, they aim to foster inclusivity and equity within the educational system. Their mission is to enhance organizational capacity by providing training, resources, and incentives that empower students, staff, and the broader community to turn their innovative ideas into reality. Guided by principles of collaboration,

iterative design, and disruption of systemic inequities, they invite participants to engage in a thoughtful, community-driven process that uncovers the complex histories influencing current challenges, ultimately leading to meaningful and impactful change.

Creating an inclusive design team is crucial for effective problem-solving in the design process. A well-curated team brings together diverse members from impacted communities who can take on various roles, such as Team Leads, Project Managers, Technical Designers, Subject Matter Experts, and those with lived experience. Design Research plays a vital role in understanding the needs of those affected by the challenge, focusing on both explicit and latent needs to ensure that solutions are relevant and effective. The solution-creating process involves iterative prototyping, allowing teams to progressively refine their ideas and adapt as they gain insights, ultimately leading to actionable and meaningful outcomes.





## Chartering the PPS Climate Justice Design Team

The PPS Climate Justice department set out to recruit a broad and diverse Design Team, full of people who would each have a unique perspective and experience interfacing with Portland Public Schools. Those experiences needed to include students who are being served, but not always heard, and who are our most direct stakeholders; staff who are employed by and supported by the district, and who deal with bureaucracy and limited resources as part of their daily work; and partners who navigate how to show up in advocacy spaces and school support roles from the outside.

A critical component of creating an inclusive Design Team was ensuring that the design team members were compensated for their participation. The PPS Climate Justice department, housed under the Office of the Chief of Staff, had access to one-time grant money from the PPS Federal ESSER allocation to lift climate justice and climate resilience initiatives at PPS, understanding that just like covid-19, climate change disproportionately impacts vulnerable members of our community, and building student-centered systems and solutions will not only help with covid-19 recovery, but also climate resilience. All participants (except for 1 design team member who is a PPS central office staff and 1 from the City of Portland) were paid for their time. Students were paid through hourly stipends, teachers through Extended Hours pay, and community partners through service contracts.

Our outreach efforts aimed at diverse and inclusive engagement with students, teachers, and community partners in sustainability initiatives. For students, we utilized our monthly sustainability newsletter and the popular Trivory app, complemented by outreach through email, Instagram, and our website. Teachers received announcements in newsletters and weekly emails, and we personally contacted those who have been engaged in climate action in the past. We also reached out to a broad network of community partners focused on sustainability and social justice, many of whom had deep ties to our district. To ensure everyone felt welcome, we hosted informative Zoom sessions to explain the project and guide interested participants through the process.

After months of recruitment, we were proud of the diverse community-based Design Team that formed.

The team included:

- 28 total members, not including PPS support staff and facilitators
- 3 students
- 6 school-site staff: 4 teachers, 1 CTE Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), and 1 School-based Qualified Mental Health Professional
- 1 PPS central office staff, the Safe Routes to School Coordinator
- 16 community partner organizations, including 5 focused on supporting youth through racial equity and social justice work 9 focused on climate education and advocacy
- 2 from public partners, including City of Portland and Portland Community College

The Design Team formally came together in February to establish community agreements and introduced the concept of design research, focusing on both explicit and latent community needs. From Feb. 7, through June 26, the team met 11 times to move through the Innovation Studio Design Process.



## THE DESIGN PROCESS

The Climate Justice Design Team (the Design Team) convened with an overarching goal of answering the question: How might PPS create and support meaningful, accessible pathways to climate action, engagement opportunities, and community connection for our entire student body, especially students most affected by climate change?

The Design Team was tasked with exploring that question using a design methodology developed by the PPS Innovation Studio, a department within the district which facilitates community-centered design methods to develop answers to complex problems facing PPS. The questions that the Innovation Studio seeks to support elude simple solutions and require insight from a wide variety of program users and stakeholders. The Innovation Studio describes this work as “Creativity that disrupts the status quo and empowers those who are most impacted to create powerful change.”

The Innovation Studio Design Process embraces Design Research, an umbrella term for a set of practices that help us to understand a problem more deeply, with a particular focus on the needs of people who are most impacted. Design Research is intended to help identify solutions that are genuinely based on the needs and experiences of the stakeholders we serve, rather than settling for solutions that we as administrators “assume” or “imagine” meet those needs.

Within the Design Process, the Facilitators (the PPS Climate Justice Department and the PPS Innovation Studio) lead the Design Team through a series of exercises intended to help the participants in the Design Team explore and understand their own bias and assumptions, explore and digest community needs, and continuously iterate on developing solutions to those needs using “prototypes” to inform final recommendations. With the Design Process, prototyping is a process of testing and learning or “progressive approximation” that gets closer and closer to the final product. In design prototyping, we ask stakeholders to imagine or experience how a solution might work – and how it might not work, and then we iterate based on what we find out. This allows us to refine our insights and recommendations in a meaningful way before we begin to invest in their actual implementation.

The role of the Facilitators is to provide resources, context, and access to better understand the Problem Statement, while the role of the Design Team is to connect with their communities, networks, and each other’s expertise to articulate the needs and potential solutions of those most impacted by the potential solutions.





# Design Process Timeline

## Phase 1:

Empathy, Humility, and History  
February - March 2024

- Learn about the history of climate injustices
- Investigate our own perspectives, positionality, and bias.
- Introduction to empathetic design - put ourselves in the shoes of the "end-users" (stakeholders) who we are designing programs for.
- Develop an expansive list of stakeholders.

## Phase 3:

Prototype and Evaluate  
May - June 2024

- Develop prototypes of solutions based design research.
- Engage stakeholders to continuously receive feedback and iterate on prototypes

## Phase 2:

Design Research: Inspiration and Ideation  
March - April 2024

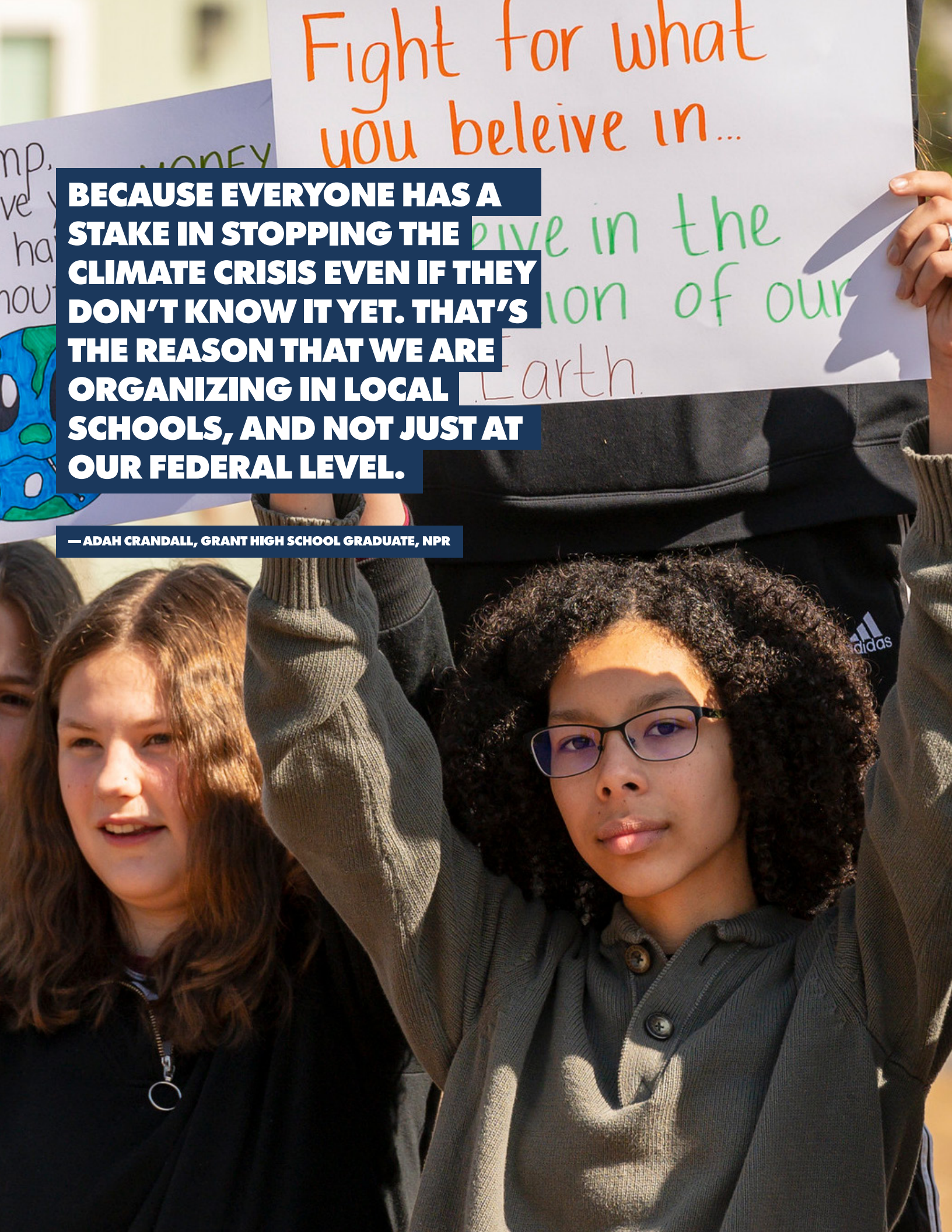
- Learn from stakeholders through observation, interviews, focus groups, and surveys.
- Identify stakeholder barriers, challenges, and needs.
- Ideate solutions that would meet stakeholder needs.

## Phase 4:

Synthesize Findings  
June 2024

- Synthesize findings, categorize recommendations, and outline long-term goals.
- Identify gaps in stakeholder engagement and potential challenges.





**BECAUSE EVERYONE HAS A  
STAKE IN STOPPING THE  
CLIMATE CRISIS EVEN IF THEY  
DON'T KNOW IT YET. THAT'S  
THE REASON THAT WE ARE  
ORGANIZING IN LOCAL  
SCHOOLS, AND NOT JUST AT  
OUR FEDERAL LEVEL.**

— ADAH CRANDALL, GRANT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE, NPR



## Design Team Structure

In order to understand the barriers and opportunities to build out accessible pathways to climate action, engagement opportunities, and community connection for our entire student body, especially students most affected by climate change, we would need to consider not just the student experience, but the experience of all the different stakeholders who comprise an ecosystem of student support.

Through a collaborative stakeholder mapping exercise, the Design Team identified four primary stakeholder categories, which became the focus areas for breakout groups (Pods). The Design Team members selected which Pod they were most interested in given their unique background, network and skill set, resulting in five pods:

**Pods 1 & 2: Student Experience in Schools** - What do students, especially those from historically under-invested in communities, need to feel supported by the district? What do meaningful and accessible pathways to student climate action look like for students?

**Pod 3: Student Support Systems** - What are the ways that teachers, parents, counselors, and other student support staff can be involved in this work? What support do they need from the district in order to engage in student climate projects and even actively support and mentor students who are working on those projects?

**Pod 4: “It takes a village”** - What do community partners, volunteers, local artists and local businesses need to better connect with and support students on these pathways? What are some ways they want to connect?

**Pod 5: “Reworking the system”** - How do the central office, principals, and facilities departments need to adapt in order to best support student pathways to climate work? What larger systems need to be addressed to have more equitable, accessible and justice-oriented student support

The Design Team participated in the Design Process timeline from the perspective of their pod focus. They conducted outreach via interviews, surveys, observations at events, and more, to better understand how students, teachers, parents, PPS leadership, and community partners viewed opportunities and challenges to support students in learning about, living through, or leading in climate change. They investigated each individual stakeholder group’s hopes, fears, frustrations, and areas of excitement.

## Findings

### Pods 1 & 2: Student Experience in Schools

Through engaging in conversations with students and teachers, Pods 1 and 2 revealed challenges that students face in getting involved with climate action are largely a result of a lack of clarity, accessibility and consistency from the district leaders. While there's a strong sense of trust between students and teachers, there's a **notable lack of trust** toward school administration, often due to inconsistent support for climate initiatives. Students also expressed **uncertainty about how to get involved** in climate action. Without access to a clear pathway for student leadership at a district level, and unclear expectations around restrictive policies that prevent them from participating in important civic engagement events like student-led marches, it can feel confusing for students to know where and how they can plug into existing efforts at their schools.

In addition to engagement, there's a clear need for a more **comprehensive, accessible climate justice curriculum that addresses systemic change**, rather than just individual actions. The focus on individual actions without connecting to systems of change can exacerbate a sense of hopelessness and overwhelm. Aligning this curriculum with built-in **support for mental and emotional well-being** is vital, as students are grappling with not only learning about a future of climate disaster, but living through and witnessing real-time climate crises - in addition to economic, geo-political, safety-related crises - regularly.

Additional support systems that can help with this sense of overwhelm focus on **student agency**, such as hands-on opportunities to make a difference during school hours, along with guidance on career paths in climate justice. More intentional connection and **equitable access to outdoor learning spaces** at every school site would foster place-based and project-based learning that can create more equitable and accessible pathways for tending to emotional impacts of climate change, connection to tangible action, and a practical application of classroom lessons. However, many teachers express feeling overwhelmed by their current workloads, emphasizing that climate justice efforts can't just be added to their plates without real support on how to integrate these lessons into the existing curricula.

Finally, having mentorship and role-models who reflect our diverse student identities and experiences is key to fostering engagement and motivation. Partnering with community organizations who can show students the diverse needs and pathways to make meaningful change is important not only for this representation, but also for supporting teachers to lean on local experts to provide culturally responsive enrichment to the curriculum. However, it is vital to create sustainable support systems to foster these partnerships, as without that consistent support the continuous cycle of building and diminishing new partnerships or plans can harm relationships rather than strengthen them.

To meet these needs, the student experience Pod recommends prioritizing consistent funding, weaving climate justice into all areas of the curriculum, and creating supportive structures that empower both students and teachers.

### Pod 3: Student Support Systems

Through interviews with students, teachers, parents, volunteers and community partners, Pod 3 explored the systems available (or needed) to support students. The research revealed a strong desire among parents and students for structural and cultural changes within schools to better support low income families and students to participate in climate action.

Parents already engaged with environmental action at schools envision infrastructural improvements to increase their capacity to **better support students with hands-on experiences**. These include calls to implement waste reduction measures (such as food recovery, donations, tastings and food scrap bins), school gardens, along with initiatives that promote walking and biking to school. To increase retention of parent volunteers and to foster greater community involvement, especially for low-income families, these parents advocate for **more validation and recognition of volunteer efforts and aligning school messaging** with environmental goals. District storytelling through newsletters and reports can further recognize and celebrate the roles that parents, volunteers, and community groups play in making school climate justice successes possible. Compensating volunteers with stipends or gift cards can help address barriers related to time and financial resources, and help boost support for students.



*“Implement adequate climate education for all students and all ages, not just high school. Because a lot of us are learning it now but in middle school it was really scary to learn about climate change and we didn’t really know the solutions yet. We have the resources. it should be more than just a couple days of learning.”*

*– Student Climate Justice Club Leader*

In addition, students expressed a need for more **comprehensive climate education integrated across all grade levels**, as well as more **accessible hands-on learning opportunities outside the classroom**, particularly in underserved communities. This includes comprehensive curricula that are engaging and accessible to students of all ages, ensuring students understand climate issues and solutions in a way that is grade appropriate and culturally relevant. They emphasized the importance of **practical experiences like field trips and schoolyard projects, alongside mentorship programs**. Students also articulated the importance of **alignment** between what they’re **learning in class and the practices available** every day in some of their schools. Middle school students said they feel guilty about being part of the problem if they need to use disposable plastic utensils at school and toss uneaten food in the landfill bin when composting isn’t available in the cafeteria. Students are keen to advance projects that would allow their whole day at school to be more aligned with climate justice; from the trips to school, to the messages and symbols they see in their buildings, to the practices available to them.

*“Give us more time and money to help with student climate projects. Let us design ideas and adults can help us carry them out.”*

*– Wesley, Middle School Student*

There is a demand for funding and resources to support student-led projects and activities to **increase student agency**. A key element of environmental justice is stronger representation in legislative discussions of those most affected by policy decisions. There is an opportunity for increased sense of student agency by **empowering student-led initiatives that allow diverse voices to influence policy**, ensuring that the needs and concerns of all community members are heard. In addition, providing **financial support for student-led projects**, such as sustainable fashion shows or climate fairs, allows students from various backgrounds to take active roles in their communities and express their commitment to sustainability.







Overall, fostering a supportive environment for climate action requires consistent support and recognition of parents and volunteers to ensure more equitable participation, as well as a commitment to integrated learning experiences (both through formal curriculum and daily school experiences) that prioritize student empowerment.

#### Pod 4: “It Takes a village”

The idea behind Pod 4, “It Takes a Village” is to understand the strengths and challenges that entities outside of PPS face when trying to work with the District. Given the limited funding and resources allocated to public education, partnerships with community organizations, non-profits, and businesses are essential to curating a rich and vibrant experience for our students. To explore this question, Pod 4 engaged a diverse group of community partners, nonprofits, and businesses dedicated to supporting student-led climate action.

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**IN LOWER-INCOME COMMUNITIES(OUR PRIORITY), OUR CHANGEMAKER VOLUNTEERS TEND TO FACE MORE BARRIERS TO LEADING CLIMATE ACTION PROJECTS AND GREEN TEAMS WITH STUDENTS... WHETHER IT'S TRANSPORTATION NEEDS, WORKING MULTIPLE JOBS, LANGUAGE BARRIERS, TIGHT PTA BUDGETS, OR COMPETING SCHOOL PRIORITIES. AS A SMALL NONPROFIT, IT TAKES MORE TIME AND FUNDING TO PROVIDE THESE SUPPORTS TO THE COMMUNITIES MOST IMPACTED BY CLIMATE INJUSTICE. THEIR VOLUNTEER PASSION AND SKILL IS ALREADY THERE. WHEN WE CAN PAIR OUR TRAINING AND SERVICES WITH SUPPORTS LIKE CHILD CARE AND FOOD FOR MEETINGS, TRANSLATION, SIMPLE PROJECT MATERIALS, AND VOLUNTEER STIPENDS, COMMITTED VOLUNTEERS TEND TO KEEP AT IT FOR YEARS. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OR FUNDING FOR THESE SERVICES HELPS US SUPPORT MORE CLIMATE JUSTICE ADVOCATES LEADING TO MORE CLIMATE ACTION IN SCHOOLS AND MORE STUDENTS WITH THE SKILLS TO ADVANCE CLIMATE JUSTICE THEMSELVES.**

– Amy Higgs, Executive Director at Eco-School Network



A significant insight from their interviews was the **eagerness to initiate or sustain student-driven climate initiatives**, particularly from organizations already active in elementary schools. However, many expressed concern about the limited access to funding and the need for **consistent financial support** to grow projects from initial ideas into sustainable initiatives. Community partners emphasize the need for **culturally relevant programming** that reflects the diverse backgrounds of students. Increasing the capacity of these organizations to provide such programming is essential for fostering an inclusive environment for all learners. To enhance the effectiveness of partnerships, there is a need for **capacity-building resources** for community organizations.

Community partners also highlighted challenges in working with PPS due to bureaucratic obstacles, advocating for a streamlined and equitable engagement process. A more **streamlined and equitable process for collaboration** would encourage community partners to engage more easily with PPS and enhance student-led initiatives. This could involve funding for staff dedicated to developing and implementing student-led projects, ensuring that these organizations can meet the diverse needs of youth while moving away from extractive models of collaboration.

Mental health emerged as a critical issue, acknowledging that students, teachers, and community partners all encounter mental health challenges when facing the realities of climate change. This theme underscores the necessity for **wrap-around services and capacity-building funding** to enable effective participation. These services should support the **well-being of all stakeholders** involved in climate action work, allowing them to engage effectively.

To strengthen partnerships, recommendations include providing dedicated funding for project development and fostering collaborative models that respects and integrates the knowledge and labor of marginalized communities.

### **Pod 5: “Reworking the system”**

Pod 5 examined changes that could be made at the district level to better support our ability to administer this work in an equitable, scalable, sustainable way. They discovered a variety of things staff can implement and advocate for at the district level.

One primary need is to integrate climate education as a central thread throughout all subjects by creating an **interdisciplinary climate curriculum**. Integrating climate education transforms the educational framework, making environmental literacy a fundamental component of the curriculum. This systemic approach empowers students with the knowledge and skills to address climate challenges in various contexts. Engaging teachers through meaningful climate justice professional development and teacher training are essential elements to this process, especially methods that involve opportunities for peer-to-peer teacher training.

For project based work at a school level, the central office can support by having a **designated project manager at the central office** assigned to student-led climate projects. Climate action that impacts a school often requires navigating PPS bureaucracy and this project manager would be a huge help. It is also critical to **loop in principals** to ensure they receive direction communication at the start of the year about the district goal and processes to support student and teacher-led climate action. **Designating and paying a school-based staff member** to oversee climate-related projects will ensure continuity and support for initiatives, as well as invaluable leadership and expertise for students to learn from. This may also include PPS helping organize or support career fairs that actively involve families and emphasize **Inclusive Career Pathways** that are climate-related. This can broaden access to opportunities for underrepresented groups and ensures that all community members are aware of and can pursue pathways in sustainable industries, fostering long-term economic equity.

Lastly, from an equity standpoint, **streamlining opportunities for partner participation** by creating clear and simple pathways for community partners to collaborate with schools encourages equitable participation in educational initiatives. This supports diverse voices and resources contributing to climate action and education. **Building shared outdoor learning spaces** can also enhance equity by promoting access to climate education. Outdoor learning also facilitates collaboration across disciplines and encourages all students to engage with environmental issues as part of their everyday learning.



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**IMPLEMENT ADEQUATE CLIMATE EDUCATION FOR ALL STUDENTS AND ALL AGES, NOT JUST HIGH SCHOOL. BECAUSE A LOT OF US ARE LEARNING IT NOW BUT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL IT WAS REALLY SCARY TO LEARN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND WE DIDN'T REALLY KNOW THE SOLUTIONS YET. WE HAVE THE RESOURCES. IT SHOULD BE MORE THAN JUST A COUPLE DAYS OF LEARNING.**

- Student Climate Justice Club Leader





## Collective Findings

Each pod focused on different stakeholder groups and perspectives to understand the complex needs to be considered when working to increase student support and engagement in climate action, and ultimately each pod came up with distinct prototypes for solutions to address those needs. As a collective, clear needs arose as themes consistent for each stakeholder group that PPS should take seriously and center when designing or implementing programs or resources.

### **Equitable Access to Education and Resources:**

Across all pods, there is a strong emphasis on providing inclusive and accessible climate education. This includes developing comprehensive curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and ensuring all students, particularly those from marginalized communities, have the tools and opportunities to engage with tangible, culturally-relevant, place-based and project-based learning.

### **Support for Mental Health, Student Agency, and**

**Community Well-Being:** The need for mental and emotional support emerges as a critical theme. Both students and educators face significant stress related to climate crises, necessitating wrap-around services that properly resource educators, staff and community partners to support students grappling with the many crises they face growing up amidst the climate crisis.

### **Sustained Collaboration and Capacity Building:**

There is a clear need for sustainable partnerships and consistent funding to support community organizations and student-led initiatives. This includes addressing bureaucratic barriers to collaboration with schools and fostering long-term relationships that are not extractive. Providing resources and capacity-building opportunities for community partners ensures that diverse voices are included in climate justice work and that initiatives can thrive over time.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

After engagement with different stakeholder groups, each Pod developed a persona that represented a variety of needs that they heard from the communities they engaged with. They referenced these personas to create prototypes of tangible, actionable projects and recommendations that PPS could implement to respond to these identified needs.

## Prototypes

From the Innovation Studio: A prototype is a model that illustrates a concept. The process of prototyping is one of progressive approximation—getting closer and closer to the final product, knowing that our understanding of the context and the proposed solutions will change as we go. This template will assist you in clearly communicating what your prototype is, who will be impacted by it, and which essential conditions are necessary for successful implementation.

The Pods worked as groups to develop prototypes that would directly address the needs they hear from the interviews, surveys and other research methods. They had the opportunity to share the prototypes across pods to gain feedback from other stakeholder perspectives, as well as with students at the PPS Climate Summit. Finally, the design team as a whole considered the timing and implementation of the prototypes, making visual representations of what prototypes must be implemented first or that would have the largest impact in order to most effectively address community needs and structural changes. The outcome of this iterative design work is the following recommended prototypes.

Recommended Prototype Examples<sup>1</sup>

### Capacity Building:

- Full-time Climate Action Project Management Position: Create a Climate Action Project Management staff position for Student/and School-based Climate Projects so green projects can be implemented when funds are available and allocated.
- Volunteer Power for Student Climate Action, K-8 edition: A workforce of parents and community volunteers is trained and supported in bringing climate solutions to schools, engaging students.

- Volunteer Power for Student Climate Action, HS edition: A workforce of high school students and community volunteers is trained and supported in bringing climate solutions to their schools, engaging students.
- Capacity Pathways for Community Stakeholders: Streamline entry point for organizations to PPS by addressing issues like funding, bureaucracy/red tape and capacity support.

### Advancing Student Agency:

- **Climate Project Playbook:** A menu of climate action activities and projects that schools have successfully implemented in the past and a playbook of what their implementation may entail.
- **Air Quality Education, Monitoring, and Advocacy:** Students would learn how to install monitors, how to collect and read data, and then have an opportunity to use their data for advocacy initiatives in their community.
- **Food Waste Reduction and Diversion Program:** Schools recover and donate untouched/ unserved foods and divert post consumer food waste from cafeterias to a composting system, ideally on-site to generate hands-on learning and leadership.
- **School Yard Food Forests:** Planting perennial food forests and native habitat on school property to engage all students across grades and disciplines.

### Systemic Integration of a Climate Curriculum across education:

**Climate Justice as Embodied Practice to Decolonize, Reintegrate Cultural Ways of Being:** A hub with culturally specific community partners where Bodies of Culture are resourced and provided opportunities to share culturally relevant knowledge in relationship to Climate Justice.

[Link to PDF featuring full descriptions of Design Team's Prototypes](#)



**Climate Justice Curriculum Camp / Teacher Professional Development:** Develop place-based, climate justice curriculum modules – co-created by teachers, students and community organizations at summer curriculum camp(s) – that can be used for district-wide teacher professional development and used in classrooms.

**Climate Change Career and Technical Ed. track and Climate Corps:** Career and Technical Ed. curriculum related to climate action work, providing students with exposure to a range of climate-related careers and opportunities to intern with organizations.

**Career and Technical Education Program for Climate Justice:** Students participate in introductory climate education lessons, then choose which hands-on track to participate in. More focused on justice, community, and activism.

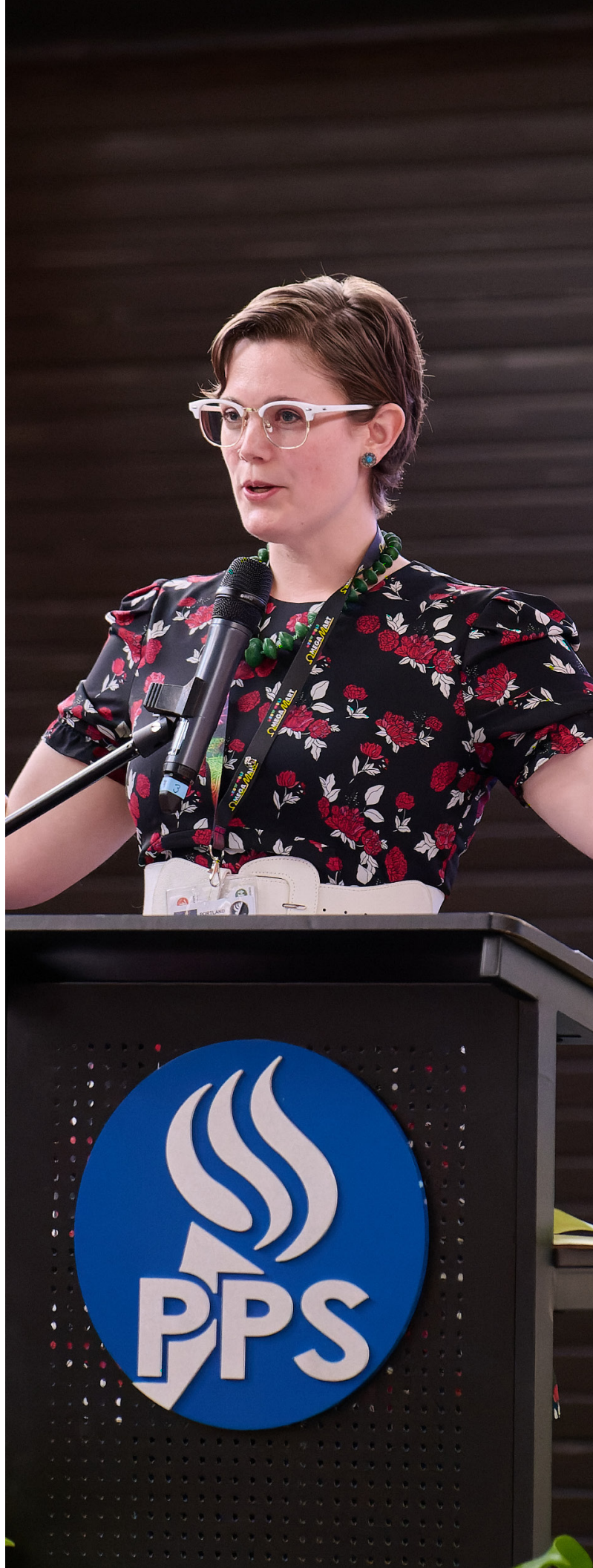
**Integrating Climate Justice into School Programs:** Bringing climate justice into other school spaces like Journalism, Leadership, Affinity groups, Podcasting, Newspaper, and Restorative Justice, etc.

### **Recommendations to Guide our Work**

In addition to the prototypes, the Design Team used a process of empathetic inquiry and community engagement to identify a set of community-created values that should guide the work of climate justice and climate action at PPS.

### **Recommended Values to Guide PPS Climate Justice Action**

- Center Justice and Equity through a commitment to decolonization
- Build and maintain community trust through collaboration and accountability
- Foster Critical Hope through Youth Agency, Action and Empowerment
- Support systems improvements with sustainable, scalable change





## Recommended Desired Outcomes of PPS Climate Justice Action

**Inclusive Collaboration:** Foster reciprocal partnerships with indigenous communities, communities of color, students with disabilities, and other historically underserved groups in program design and implementation.

**Holistic Support:** Create school environments that promote student joy, resilience, and preparation for challenges in a climate-changed world.

**Hands-On Experience:** Provide students with practical opportunities to engage in meaningful action and explore diverse career pathways.

**Connection to Nature:** Encourage students to see their school grounds as vital spaces for learning and healing.

**Social and Emotional Skills:** Equip students to envision a hopeful future and effectively navigate challenges.

**Intergenerational Learning:** Facilitate connections among students of all ages and abilities for enriched learning experiences.

**Critical Awareness:** Empower students to understand the roots of the climate crisis and their potential to drive meaningful change.





## LESSONS LEARNED & FACILITATOR INSIGHTS

Engaging students, teachers, and community partners through the Innovation Studio Design Research process provided valuable insights into navigating PPS systems. The facilitators experienced, alongside the Design Team members, how challenging it can be to identify the correct entry point to reach different audiences. This learning re-emphasized the need for consistent feedback, iteration, and more accessible and transparent pathways for engagement for both external and internal stakeholders.

In addition, the facilitators consistently struggled with the balance of relationship building with practical action during the in-person Design Team meetings. Meaningful introductions and connections among participants were crucial, even if they took time away from planning. Many participants were enthusiastic about diving into tangible work, yet facilitators didn't fully anticipate the time needed for essential relationship-building, resulting in a trade-off during meeting times between planning or connecting. Moreover, there was a mismatch in understanding participants' capacity to engage with Design Team content between meetings. This disconnect between our theoretical discussions and practical application made it difficult for everyone to stay engaged and fully invested in the process. It's important to acknowledge these challenges so we can better support each other moving forward.

As the design team's excitement grew, time constraints began to feel more limiting; feedback indicated that more meetings—4 to 6 additional sessions—would have fostered deeper engagement. The facilitators also noted that longer meetings and a weekly schedule might have helped establish a better rhythm. Ultimately, the end of grant funding halted progress just as momentum was building, highlighting the importance of pacing, relationship development, and sustained engagement in collaborative efforts for future success.





## NEXT STEPS

The Climate Justice Design Team's outcomes offer valuable insights that are both actionable and guide future practices for PPS Climate Justice engagement, empowerment, and education. With the rollout of the PCEF Student Climate Project Funds, facilitators are committed to applying these lessons by prioritizing funding for teachers driving this work, encouraging student partnerships with community organizations for sustainable initiatives, and ensuring thorough outreach to all levels of the district. By creating transparent entry points for community partners and collaborating with internal departments to reduce barriers, we aim to facilitate successful project implementation. Additionally, developing a "Climate Project Playbook" will inspire students with tangible project opportunities, fostering a hopeful and impactful future for climate action. Being the first year of allocation, there are still many lessons to learn ahead to more successfully implement these funds and more insights from the Design Team we intend to include.

While many of the recommendations require long term approaches to cultural change and program development, **five outcomes from the Spring 2024 Design Team inspired immediate action items** for the 2024-2025 school year include:

1. **Develop a PPS Climate Project Playbook** to support student led climate projects.
2. **Develop Partnership Pathways for Community Stakeholders:** create a streamlined and clear way for community partners to get involved with PPS student climate work. For the 2025-26 school year, connect community partners to students to act as thought partners in developing student climate projects. Utilize partners to help show students how to think more deeply about the integration of justice, community, and climate in their projects.
3. **Career and Technical Education & Curriculum Planning:** collaborate with Middle Grades Redesign Project-Based Learning initiative and CTE to integrate climate action into project-based and career training education.

4. **Integrated Climate Justice Curriculum:** Conduct a Climate Justice Curriculum Assessment to better understand where and how students currently learn about climate change and climate justice, and create a plan for bridging the gaps in education with project-based, place-based practices championed by teachers leading the change. Engage teachers through meaningful climate justice professional development and teacher training, especially focusing on methods that involve opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.
5. **Advance a deeper engagement strategy** to continue this work with students and teachers from underrepresented and underserved communities.

In addition, Dr. Armstrong has started her time at PPS with a vision for how to prioritize our work as a district to focus on Building Trust and Relationships Across our City, Advance Literacy, Strengthen Safe, Supportive and Well-Maintained Schools. The Climate Justice Advisor is able to participate in each of these priority initiatives with direct feedback on opportunities for improvement to increase transparency, accessibility, accountability and trust, referencing the feedback directly from the Design Team.

Understanding that 5 months is not enough time to properly conduct deep engagement with our highest need communities, the Climate Justice team continues to advocate for this work, with a focus to engage more intentionally with stakeholders who were less represented in the Spring 2024 scope. Engaging in praxis – the integration and alternation of thought and practice – will allow the PPS climate justice and sustainability teams to continue to listen deeply and responsively to the needs of the community while enacting climate justice actions across the district that tend to the immediate urgency of the crisis.

## CONCLUSION

There are challenges to achieving PPS's climate goals, most notably mobilizing resources for large-scale infrastructure change and coordinating the necessary community engagement within the confines of a limited budget. Beyond fiscal needs, challenges range from the minute details of implementation decisions to the big-picture complexities of a transformative culture shift. At the heart of our work as a district, though, is student wellness. It is vital to examine our district systems to ensure that this organization is more accessible and transparent to navigate and such that our teachers,

parents, staff and community partners can support the intensifying urgency and relevance of students growing up in the climate crisis, hungry to make meaningful change. There are challenges to achieving PPS's climate goals, most notably mobilizing resources for large-scale infrastructure change and coordinating the necessary community engagement within the confines of a limited budget. Beyond fiscal needs, challenges range from the minute details of implementation decisions to the big-picture complexities of a transformative culture shift. At the heart of our work as a district, though, is student wellness. It is vital to examine our district systems to ensure that this organization is more accessible and transparent to navigate and such that our teachers, parents, staff and community partners can support the intensifying urgency and relevance of students growing up in the climate crisis, hungry to make meaningful change.





# WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

