



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.

The books are littered with conditional language. The high school text *Biology*: As greenhouse gas concentrations increase, global temperatures “may be affected,” and there might be “potential” for serious environmental problems. And: “Explain how burning of fossil fuels

confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice — especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of cli-

mate change.” These are both true, of course, but the resolution’s intent is to emphasize our students’ own role in making the world a better place, rather than assigning concern and action only to scientists and environmentalists.

All 13 of the books earned an F. Our committee is in the midst of sending letters to each publisher informing them that their book is out of compliance with Portland school district policy on climate education. We are also sending letters to teachers who may be using these books, alerting them to our findings and urging them to use alternatives, and to engage students in critical reading activities to dissect the problems with these texts’ hohum approach to climate change.

Do we expect to influence these corporations’ treatment of the climate crisis in their textbooks? No. The corporate giants that publish school textbooks have no interest in raising critical questions about the frenzied system of extraction and consumption at the root of climate change — a system from which they benefit. Our aim is to build an argument that we cannot look to conventional sources of curriculum to educate our students about the causes of climate change and the kind of fundamental social transformation needed to address the crisis.

For this, we need a grassroots approach to curriculum development — a partnership among educators, parents, environmental organizations, frontline communities, and our students. We need to demand time for teachers to collaborate, to write new curriculum, to share stories — to learn from one another and from the communities being hit by climate change first and the hardest. The climate crisis threatens life on Earth. Our students have a right to learn about this and to know that they can make a difference. ■



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might lead to climate change.” AP *World History* informs students that the global rise in temperatures “might have serious consequences.”

A key component of Portland’s climate justice resolution is its insistence on student agency: “All Portland Public Schools students should develop con-

mate change.” But not a single text our committee reviewed suggests that students or ordinary people can play a role in addressing this growing crisis — or that “frontline communities” are themselves responding to climate destabilization. In its one sentence on climate change, *Pursuing American Ideals* says