

RIGHT HERE!



**An Educator's Guide for Equitable Climate Action in
the Upper Valley and Beyond**

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An Educator's Guide for Equitable Climate Action in the Upper Valley and Beyond



Shelburne Farms
**Institute for
Sustainable
Schools**

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WELCOME

"The moment we decide to fulfill something, we can do anything." -Greta Thunberg

We are deeply grateful for your interest in forging new ground in education and actively responding to the climate crisis. Our community, and the world, need you and your efforts. This publication will help you engage your students in local climate solutions, develop their sense of agency, and build climate resilience in the Upper Valley of the Connecticut River and, hopefully, far beyond. We invite all who are interested to take what they can from this publication and use it as a springboard for climate change education and action, wherever they might live.

The urgency of addressing climate change cannot be overstated. According to the World Health Organization (2018), by the time our current class of first graders graduates, projected greenhouse gas emissions could result in a quarter million additional deaths per year due to climate change impacts. Tragically, the burden of these consequences fall disproportionately on marginalized communities—those who are least responsible for climate change. The time for action is now, and there are solutions available.

That's why this publication focuses on equitable climate action. Most of us learn best by doing. If we want our students to engage in more sustainable thinking and behaving, the curriculum needs to go beyond research and discussion. To gain a sense of self-efficacy, students need to *practice* making this world a better place.

Equity-centered climate action is the most direct path toward developing the knowledge and skills essential to environmental and social wellbeing. For those feeling climate anxiety and social injustices, equitable climate action also builds hope based on the visible results of student efforts. Through action, students develop confidence that they can make a difference and gain first hand insight into how to make a positive impact. Making space in the curriculum for equitable climate action signals to students that these issues are worthy of thoughtful consideration, time, and effort.

What does equitable climate action look like and how do you incorporate it into the curriculum? This was the driving question and impetus for *Right Here! An Educator's Guide to Equitable Climate Action in the Upper Valley*. We invite you to peruse this publication to see real-life, local examples that will help you and your students envision what is possible. These place-based activities offer a range of opportunities to fit your capacity and

interests. And although equity and climate change are most certainly serious topics, the experiences presented in this Guide help students find joy in community, nature, and accomplishment.

This guide does not hold all of the answers; it relies on you, with your professional experience, talents, and passions, to take these ideas and run with them. This is an invitation for educators, students, and community members to work together in the Upper Valley toward climate resilience.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

What is it?

- *Right Here!* provides both a framework and a catalog of ideas and resources for creating curricula that engages deeply with place, climate action, and equity.
- It is designed to be useful for educators seeking anything from a brief activity to more in-depth curricular endeavors.
- The approaches offered work especially well with project-based and service-learning. See The Buck Institute for detailed guidance on project-based learning and Youth.gov to learn more about service-learning.
- This is a draft product from the first phase of a larger project. Phase 2 involves working with Upper Valley (UV) organizations, educators, and students to test, refine, and add to the content.
- *Right Here!* provides the curricular ingredients for equitable climate action with your students. Combine it with your creativity and vision to prepare a curriculum that is right for you, your students, and your community.

Where did these ideas come from?

- *Right Here!* incorporates climate change education research and education work from around the country and globe.
- Inspiration, practical wisdom, and core content emerged locally from in-depth interviews conducted in 2020-2021 with 16 educators and three student climate leaders in the Upper Valley region. Their experiences provided authentic examples of what they have found has worked in our area, given local education parameters, cultural inclinations, and ecological trends.
- See Appendix I for author bios and a list of the contributors to this guide. You might detect different voices throughout the Guide since its creation was very much a collaborative process.

Who is it for?

- Right Here! was created for educators in the Upper Valley, who would like to:
 - Connect authentically with the world beyond the classroom.
 - Support their students in taking tangible action on climate issues.
 - Engage with equity issues in ways that encourage openness to different perspectives, critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of belonging for all.

Students and community organizations are encouraged to use this guide as well. The content is generally for middle school classrooms, but it is adaptable for higher and lower grades.

How do I use it?

The goal of *Right Here!* is to develop student agency through active participation in climate change mitigation and adaptation. The right way to use the guide is whatever works best for you and your students to achieve this.

You can skip around using only what calls to you or peruse the guide step by step as follows:

1. **Take a look at the REAL Framework.** This will provide an understanding of the research-based core components (Relationships, Equity, Action, and Leadership) that help prepare students for climate stewardship.
2. **Choose a topic relevant to the content you and your students want to explore.** Climate change is a multifaceted issue that can be challenging to fully grasp. To make the issue more manageable to address, the guide breaks the issue into 5 tangible topics relevant to the Upper Valley. The topics all begin with "F" to make them easier to remember. Hopefully, one or more will resonate with you and your students. These topics are: Flora and Fauna, Food, Floods, Fashion, and Fuel.
3. **For the topic you choose:**
 - a. **Read the introductory story.** This will help you visualize how other teachers in the Upper Valley have explored this topic for climate resilience.
 - b. **Dive into the REAL Framework.** Explore essential questions to build student curiosity and capacity for change-making.
 - c. **Check out the entry points.** These activities are designed to spark interest, provide some content background, and generate a desire to find out more.
 - d. **Explore the action projects.** See examples of projects designed to engage students in solutions for climate change. To help you choose an activity that fits your current capacity and desired educational outcomes, these range from quick and simple (green circle) to more involved (blue square) to full on (black diamond).
 - e. **Make use of the resources!** We collected and collated these local and more general resources to make this work a little easier. They include potential local partners in the UV, background information, other curricular ideas, and supporting materials.

How can I get more involved?

- We are looking for educators and students to try out *Right Here!* and document their experiences to create more local stories and additional resources for others following in your pioneering footsteps! Email Climate@ShelburneFarms.org to learn how you can get involved.



FUNDAMENTALS: GETTING REAL

The REAL Framework emerged from the collective wisdom of frontline educators and student leaders in the Upper Valley who were working with equity and climate change issues. In-depth interviews with these educators and students revealed that social-emotional learning is as important as other core academic knowledge and skills when it comes to meeting the challenges of climate change and its inherent inequities. While state and national standards provide the building blocks for addressing climate and equity issues, they need to be placed in a meaningful context to matter to students. The REAL Framework is designed to empower the hearts of students and help them use these academic building blocks wisely and effectively to create a healthier future for all.

The REAL framework begins with nurturing **R**elationships with self, community, and nature. Considering those relationships, we explore **E**quity narratives and paradigms which influence how living communities experience and respond to climate change. From there we move to **A**ction, focusing on climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts in the context of place to change the dynamics of extractive systems to more regenerative systems. The final component, **L**eadership, is an invitation for both educators and students to amplify their impact through collective action, recognizing that we need to encourage the voices and gifts of others to participate in climate resilience.

The REAL components naturally scaffold. As relationships develop, so does understanding and caring. From this foundation, a clearer view emerges of the systems which connect self, others, and nature. These systems might include flows of energy, resources, power, and other forces. When investigated, inequities or unhealthy imbalances in our environmental and social systems become more apparent. To change this dynamic, informed action is needed. To change the dynamic more broadly and deeply, leadership is essential.

Relationships: Cultivating a Healthy Foundation for Climate Stewardship

Healthy relationships fuel thriving systems. In order to foster strong, resilient social and ecological systems in our communities, we need people who have a growth mindset, can work with one another, and have an understanding and appreciation of the natural world.

Providing students with the tools and the practice to strengthen intrapersonal, interpersonal, and nature-based relationships empowers them to become a vibrant part of our systems of life. While these relationships all feed into one another, we'll explore them one by one to better understand their role in climate resilience.

Relationship with Self



"Courage is not the absence of fear,
but rather the judgment that
something else is more important than
fear."

—Ambrose Redmoon

From a practical perspective, students need a healthy relationship with themselves to self-regulate and work through the obstacles inherent in equitable climate action. When students feel more calm and secure internally, they can more thoughtfully consider others and the environment when addressing their external needs. They will also tend to have more emotional capacity to persevere, focus, be courageous, and find joy in their work.

As equity and climate change are highly complex challenges, students need ample time to make sense of what they are learning, why it might matter to them, and what actions they would like to take. For the purposes of this guide, the relationship to oneself is explored by

reflecting on personal experiences with each climate topic and how that shapes beliefs about and interactions with these topics.

Starting with themselves—often a topic of great interest!—can help make the material more engaging, relatable, and meaningful to students. Connecting to what students already know (the constructivist methodology) can increase their motivation to learn and increase the retention of new information. Deep self-reflection can also help students to develop empathy for themselves and others.

As students move forward, they will inevitably make mistakes. If living in harmony with each other and with nature were easy, the world would look quite different! Explicitly framing setbacks as learning opportunities discourages feelings of inadequacy, while simultaneously encouraging a growth mindset; both are essential for generating hope and climate resilience.¹

Finally, let's face it, we all have biases that interfere with seeing ourselves and the world clearly. Identifying and testing assumptions in a compassionate way promotes both self-awareness and good science. The examples in this guide create the "aha" opportunities for students to see firsthand how their own perceptions and actions might contribute to inequities and climate change in both positive and less than positive ways. At the same time, these experiential activities lay the groundwork for students to discover their interests and unique abilities to build a more beautiful and just future.

Relationships with Others to Build Community



"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."
—African Proverb

1. Ojala, M. (2015). Hope in the face of climate change: Associations with environmental engagement and student perceptions of teachers' emotion communication style and future orientation. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 46(3), 133-148.
<https://doi:10.1080/00958964.2015.1021662>

Climate change and related equity challenges cannot be solved by working in isolation. We all need positive and nurturing relationships with others to collaborate effectively and engage in creative problem-solving to adequately address these deep-rooted issues.

During our research interviews with educators and students, the need for trust was emphasized repeatedly. Trust is a cornerstone of productive working relationships, especially for equitable climate action. Yet, as evidenced by the many youth climate strike signs, such as, "If you were smarter we would be in school now!" and, "Blah, Blah, Blah—Action Now!" many youths do not trust that adults are doing enough to fight the climate crisis and social injustices. Building trust by working in partnership with adult mentors lays the foundations for equity-centered climate action.

Trust is also a core theme when developing a sense of collective efficacy. Providing multiple opportunities for students to work with a variety of individuals helps them learn how to navigate the complicated art of group work. Many educators recommended hands-on learning spaces that allow for students to do climate work while informally connecting with each other and/or community partners. Such work might include preparing food from the school garden, sketching plans for more sustainable schoolyards, planting dune grass or trees, organizing meeting space for an environmental club, creating informational posters, etc. Even transportation "down time" (e.g., walking, hiking, bus rides) offers opportunities for relationship building.

In addition to working on relationship skills in the classroom with one another, students can have a bigger impact in "real life" by partnering with local climate leaders from different fields (e.g., law, engineering, forestry, healthcare, art, business, transportation, agriculture, journalism, etc.). Working with a variety of community members illustrates the depth and breadth of climate work that is taking place, while building trust that many adults are on it—or at least trying their dang best! Seeing the variety of people involved in climate change mitigation and adaptation locally and beyond can also help students see where their unique current and future selves might fit into this worldwide effort.

Last, but definitely not least, the climate crisis can feel overwhelming and it won't be solved with quick, easy fixes. It makes sense to invest in a mutually supportive network of fellow learners to facilitate progress over the long-term. We need one another to hold ourselves accountable, provide pep talks when floundering, brainstorm when stuck, share our experiences and talents, and make this journey as fun as possible. Whenever feasible, reach out to colleagues, community partners, parents, friends—and, of course, students!—for company on this journey rather than trying to go it alone. The connections you make will definitely pay off.