

Is education standing up to the task of climate action?

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Amid today's climate crisis, the global education community is faced with the reality that it has done too little too late.

Despite the [evidence](#) that education, [especially of girls](#), has a strong role to play in both climate adaptation and mitigation, the global education community has done little to advance widescale education efforts for, by, or with K-12 children and youth in school settings around the world. Indeed, where children and youth have taken to the streets to demand climate justice, education officials and teachers have been polarized in terms of whether they should [join students](#) in their "[school strike for climate](#)," or [punish them for truancy](#).

This rather tepid response, however, is not isolated to youth activism, but rather is symptomatic of the education sector's overall avoidance of climate action. For instance, SDG 4 (related to quality education) nearly sidesteps climate change, rolling it into a broader Target 4.7 that is focused on education for sustainable development, global citizenship education, gender equality, and human rights education. Climate change education, notably, receives a parenthetical acknowledgement, as part of an indicator for SDG 12 (related to sustainable consumption and production).

What explains the education sector's lukewarm stance on climate action? Here are three reasons—from which a forthcoming Brookings report will elaborate.

1. The global education community lacks a radical vision for

education. Education systems around the world continue to trumpet the neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal values of a modern western education system. Such a system posits learners as separate from the non-human world, and positions the content that they learn as enabling them to control, dominate, and exploit that world. We see this today in the overemphasis of global education discussions around the [learning crisis](#) framed in terms of [children's inability to read or to do basic mathematics](#), affecting their ability to become [productive and successful adults](#) who join the labor market and sustain corporate interests. Rarely do we see the learning crisis framed in terms of children's inability to understand concepts like carrying capacity, human dignity, or to engage in [planetary thinking](#). This in turn affects their ability to become sustainability citizens who are not only responsible "[to distant people and places and past and future generations](#)" but also stewards of the environment and non-human life.

2. The global education community won't value what it doesn't measure. While the [2016 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report](#)—dedicated to the thematic area of “education for people and planet,”—helped to usher the education sector into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) era, the global education community responded with inertia. Why? In large part, because there isn't an effective accountability mechanism for ensuring the education sector is doing enough to prepare learners to respond to, adapt to, and mitigate against further climate change. Due to conceptual, reporting, and political challenges with measurement, there has been [no data](#) collected to date for SDG global indicator 4.7.1—the indicator that measures whether countries are delivering on the vision that all learners have the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. Setbacks continue to mire [efforts](#) by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the [Global Alliance to Monitor Learning](#) (GAML), and other actors to develop a more fulsome data collection methodology.

3. Teachers lack the systemic support to become change agents. As a result of both the lack of radical vision and the lack of accountability, those individuals on the front lines of classrooms have not been adequately supported to be the change agents our planet needs. An [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) shows that in the U.S., 86% of teachers think climate change should be taught in classrooms, yet only 42% actually teach it. Another study conducted by the [National Center for Science Education](#) shows that more than 25% of science teachers surveyed in the U.S. “give equal time” to perspectives that raise doubt about climate change, and nearly 31% of science teachers send “explicitly contradictory messages” about the cause of climate change. While such classroom practices might be a product of teachers trying to be more inclusive of student experiences, or even a result of pressure from parents or principals to not teach climate change, [researchers](#) have shown that these reasons comprise a minority of cases. Rather, such patterns are more likely a result of teachers' own knowledge gaps, as well as a lack of training on how to respond to misinformation about climate change that might arise in the classroom.