Sustainability Education Policy Brief For Los Angeles County, Chicago, and Port Huron

LOCAL TEAM POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief aims to describe findings on how demographic factors are impacting the implementation of sustainability in the United States, specifically in Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; and Port Huron, Michigan. These factors include income, political affiliation, age, and population.

Prepared by: Lucy Getacho, Lance Mahome, Priyam Shah Pandey, and Arman Rostomyan

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I. Executive Summary

This policy brief aims to describe findings on how demographic factors are impacting the implementation of sustainability in the United States, specifically in Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; and Port Huron, Michigan. These factors include income, political affiliation, age, and population.

II. Background

Sustainability education has been defined by UNESCO as allowing "every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to shape a sustainable future" (UNESCO, 2014). This includes teaching students about climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable consumption. The United States currently lacks a strong policy in this sector, especially compared with other countries such as Canada and France. Teachers across the United States report a lack of support for teaching sustainability, according to a recent poll by the Smithsonian Science Education Center and Gallup (Merod, 2023). Sustainability education must be tailored to local demographics, politics, and economics because of the variation across school systems, as highlighted by the three cities this brief has identified. Los Angeles, for example, has a much larger budget given its size, making it easier to implement a sustainability curriculum. The issue, however, lies in funding inequities that limit which students have access to environmental literacy. Smaller cities like Port Huron rely more on community-driven initiatives as governmental investment is more limited. The challenge this brief intends to address is how local governments can aid school systems, given demographic factors, in creating a better, more standardized curriculum and funding for sustainability education in schools.

III. Policy Analysis

All three cities have made many efforts to implement programs that improve environmental literacy in schools, but there are still gaps that must be addressed. Of the three, Los Angeles has created the most programs and funding opportunities for "green" schools or improved curricula. They currently have

a program called Sustainable Environment Enhancement Developments for Schools (SEEDS) Program and Nature Explore classrooms in early education centers. Michigan has a program called the Michigan Green Schools Program, which Port Huron is part of; it aims to support students' environmental literacy.

IV. Policy Recommendations

Los Angeles:

The policy recommended for Los Angeles is an equity-based sustainability policy. An Equity Targeted Green Infrastructure Learning policy within LAUSD that requires schools receiving sustainability infrastructure like solar panels or school gardens to integrate those projects with student engagement. The policy should prioritize underfunded schools and mandate that a portion of sustainability funding be used for curriculum development, student engagement, and teacher training directly tied to green infrastructure. This policy will help bridge the inequities that prevent all students from accessing sustainability education. The LAUSD benefits from its centralized, large-scale school system; however, funding inequities limit engagement for certain students. We recommend prioritizing schools that lack funding and are designated as high-need. With this policy, schools will not only further their green infrastructure but also include students in the process. By requiring that some of the funding be used for instructional integration, the policy creates a clear mechanism for how this inclusion will occur. Embedding this learning into existing investments turns the sustainability infrastructure into a learning tool. This policy will reduce current disparities in sustainable education through hands-on approaches.

Chicago:

The policy recommendation for Chicago is to implement new initiatives that address the discrepancies in comprehensive sustainability curricula in low-income communities. Such a policy implementation would help address the lack of opportunities for students in low-income communities to learn about environmentalism due to resource constraints. This policy would prove most effective when applied to the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. CPS currently serves over 300,000 students, 71.8 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged. Implementing policy changes specifically for a school district that predominantly serves economically disadvantaged students would be an effective way of addressing concerns related to low-income communities and the education provided in them.

Furthermore, traditionally within the CPS budget, and as indicated in the 2026 CPS Budget Book, an emphasis on providing increased funds specifically for STEM curricula has been prioritized. A policy implementation that places greater emphasis on sustainability curricula could mark a beneficial shift toward ensuring that budgets create well-rounded learning opportunities for students, rather than limiting their resources and learning to specific subjects.

Port Huron:

The policy recommendation for Port Huron is to implement a district-wide sustainability education requirement that incorporates environmental topics into core K–12 coursework, rather than relying solely on optional programs. Currently, Port Huron schools can participate in Michigan's statewide Green Schools program, which recognizes PreK-12 schools for environmental stewardship actions, such as recycling, energy conservation, and ecosystem protection. In recent years, participation in this program has grown substantially, with over 350 schools earning certification in 2025, indicating widespread interest among Michigan schools in environmental sustainability. However, because the Michigan Green Schools program is optional, many schools do not participate, leading to inconsistent access to environmental and sustainability education. Requiring the integration of environmental and sustainability policies would ensure that all PreK-12 Port Huron students learn key conservation concepts, local ecosystems (such as nearby lakes), and other topics through science, social studies, and civics. By fusing these topics into the current curriculum rather than creating expensive new programs, this policy is more politically and financially feasible for a smaller district with limited resources, while maintaining alignment with modern-day environmental education goals.

V. Implementation Plan

Los Angeles:

Rather than creating a new district-wide mandate, this policy can leverage current budgets by pairing infrastructure with curriculum. The policy requirement outlines a fixed percentage of existing funding for instructional use. It can allocate a small percentage of the budgets they already have to green infrastructure to the instructional support side of this policy, which focuses on students' hands-on experience. The current budget for the SEEDS program is $100,000 per school, with an additional $50,000 for schools in greater need. This gives our policy a strong baseline (LAUSD). Our policy will leverage SEEDS to direct some of that funding toward sustainability-related curricula

and professional development. This will fulfill the policy's mandate that the funding will be tied to curriculum and engagement.

Implementation should begin with a targeted rollout for high-needs schools and for schools with planned or ongoing green infrastructure projects. To start implementation, LAUSD can use the data they already have to identify schools to prioritize. When choosing schools, they should identify those with infrastructure upgrades already scheduled or underway to avoid new costs. Types of infrastructure improvements could include solar panels, water recycling, and urban greening projects. The key part, however, lies in including students in these projects. Each project should incorporate a clear plan for student involvement and curriculum integration. This can look like students working in a garden, tracking water quality, or analyzing energy usage from solar panels.

Chicago:

Currently, CPS is facing low enrollment at schools in low-income districts. According to a report from Kids First Chicago: "Shrinking enrollment also narrows what schools can offer. When enrollment decreases, it becomes difficult to sustain multiple Advanced Placement courses, foreign languages, or sports teams" (Chicago's Enrollment Crisis). Such considerations should be made when approaching budgeting issues to avoid wasting funding across the district. Rather, funding increases for resources surrounding sustainability curriculum should be considered through a several-year plan, in conjunction with potential plans from the incoming full CPS board in 2027, to address enrollment concerns. This approach will allow both issues to be addressed together, a beneficial factor that will ultimately assist in the success of new budget allocations.

Port Huron:

This policy recommendation for Port Huron can be implemented by integrating environmental sustainability topics into existing PreK-12 curricula, rather than creating new, standalone programs that can be costly and ineffective. To support this implementation, the district can formalize partnerships with the Michigan Green Schools Program, allowing Port Huron schools to participate in pre-existing sustainability-related initiatives. Since Port Huron has limited funding, focusing on implementing existing initiatives and programs would keep costs low. Effectiveness can be measured through school participation rates, student engagement in community projects, and

curriculum reviews. By embedding sustainability into existing systems and emphasizing local stewardship, this approach remains financially feasible while expanding environmental and sustainability awareness across the Port Huron district.

VI. Conclusion

Implementing these policies is critical to ensuring all students, regardless of location, income, or political context, gain meaningful environmental literacy. By addressing funding inequities, curriculum gaps, and access disparities, local governments can ensure that the next generation can make informed decisions about environmental sustainability. The urgency of climate change and environmental challenges makes it essential that sustainability education is not optional but a core part of PreK-12 learning, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to create a more sustainable future.

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Publication Team

Lucy Getacho

AUTHOR

Local Team Policy Analyst

Lance Mahome

AUTHOR

Local Team Policy Analyst

Priyam Pandey

AUTHOR

Local Team Policy Analyst

Arman Rostomyan

EDITOR

Vice President of Policy