

# **“Earth Science Must Include Earth”: Student Activists’ Rhetorical Responses to Idaho’s Politicization of Environmental Education**

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## **Introduction**

In light of rapid global warming and environmental disasters across the country, climate change has recently entered the forefront of the United States’ public and political mind. The way the next generation is being taught about climate at the state level has been called into question, resulting in the politicization of environmental education in my home state: Idaho. Idaho is a conservative state that does not include environmental education into its required curriculum. But Idaho is also a state that prides itself on its wilderness and nature-focused mentality. Friction between politics and the preservation of public lands has become increasingly apparent in the Idaho statehouse as ultraconservative lawmakers continue to ignore as well as rebuke public calls to include climate change education in state curriculum (Worth and Hand, 2019). As a result, many teachers in the state hesitate to teach their students about climate change. This uncertainty has resulted in apathy as well as anger in many students in the state, including me, as we see accepted scientific fact sacrificed for political gain. As I am a former student and environmentalist who grew up in public schools in Idaho, the state’s politicization of environmental education both disturbs as well as intrigues me to figure out how and why Idaho has ended up in such a crossroads between politics and preservation and what the impacts of those crossroads are on me and future generations of Idaho students.

To examine these impacts, we have to examine the role of writing in the politicization of environmental education in Idaho. Often politicization uses writing as a catalyst to spread misinformation and a political agenda as it appears in textbooks as well as written legislation that omits the words "climate change" from state curricula. However, writing is also paramount in resisting this politicization, as news reports can help hold state legislators accountable as well as incentivize the public to become more informed about the climate crisis. Gen Z has relied on writing to build up climate movements like the Sunrise Movement and Friday’s for Future Movement. Subsequently, depending on how it is utilized, writing can both politicize or depoliticize education and most importantly can be used as an effective strategy for concrete change.

## **Synthesis**

As mentioned previously, a throughline that has become apparent in my research is that the politicization of environmental education usually originates from an individual state’s educational curriculum and standards, which are heavily affected by a state’s political leanings. Idaho’s failure to include climate change in scientific textbooks as well as state science standards, has led me to the conclusion that politics often does not stop at the statehouse and instead often

infiltrates the education of future generations. But such insidious political infiltration is not unique to only Idaho, and a broader case study of this phenomenon is showcased in two of the largest states in the US: Texas, a conservative state, vs California, a largely liberal state. Through surveying 832 teachers from California and Texas on their views on climate change, Rana Khalidi and John Ramsey (2021) seek to demonstrate how teachers' own personal perception of climate change can affect how they teach about the climate in their classrooms. Their survey found that in both California and Texas, climate education was under-researched with few resources, but in California teachers generally had a greater understanding of anthropogenic climate change than teachers in Texas. Themes in Texas are intrinsically linked to those in Idaho, because Idaho and Texas hold extremely similar political makeups and are both known for their conservative state legislatures that often hold controversial decisions over state curriculum. Additionally, Glen Branch, John Rosenau, and Minda Berbeco (2016) cite studies to prove how the composition and political standing of the state legislature and the voting patterns of state counties can help predict how effectively teachers present climate change. Their conclusion builds upon Khalidi and Ramsey's research as well as my own personal experience, as they demonstrate that the voting records of a county can correlate with the teaching of climate education as, "[t]eachers from counties with the highest percentage of Democratic votes in the last presidential election were more likely to know that the overwhelming majority of climate scientists agree that humanity is causing climate change than teachers from counties with the highest share of Republican votes" (Branch, Rosenau, Berbeco 2016). The fact that state county voting records can serve as reliable predictors for environmental education in Idaho, Texas, and beyond showcases how politicized environmental education has become and supports my proposal that often political spillover directly influences educational outcomes for public school students.

A different reason for inadequate environmental education that I discovered during my research was that in addition to state standards, teachers' own biases and perceptions of climate change play heavily into how they present such concepts to their students. By using survey methods, David Roussell and Amy Cutter-Mackenzie Knowles (2020) sought to establish that most teachers have an "unsatisfactory to rudimentary" understanding of climate change and its link to human actions. As stated previously, some of this lack of understanding could be attributed to state and county politics that intimidate or bar teachers from sharing objective analysis of climate change. This supports my own experience, as science teachers in junior high and high school often glossed over mentions of climate change in the news or popular media, and often linked climate change to trends over time instead of anthropogenic damage and greenhouse gas emissions. But personal understanding of the teachers is not the only challenge to be faced in implementing climate education. Branch, Rosenau, and Berbeco (2016) found that even teachers who displayed personal understanding of climate change continue to teach climate change as a "debatable" topic instead of scientific fact. In Idaho, teachers who do present climate change as scientific often face backlash from the statehouse as well as parents, whose ideological concerns often creep into their children's curricula. Such vitriolic anger could cause any teacher to question their own knowledge, let alone what knowledge they are passing down to their students. As a result, many students struggle to act against climate change, as they don't have foundational knowledge to inform and support such action.

Along with the importance of teachers, an insight from my research pointed to the fact that students' ability to create change is additionally dependent upon the materials they are given in order to understand concepts like climate change. If the literature and media students are given are outdated or faulty or biased, students' perception of climate change, its causes, and most importantly its solutions can become flawed or in the worst case deeply misguided. In my own state, there is constant rhetoric surrounding the so-called "hoax" of climate change, as there are a number of individuals who dispute scientific findings and literature that prove that anthropogenic climate change is indeed real. In tandem with this rhetoric, most science textbooks in Idaho make little to no mention of climate change and instead point to industrial and technological gains to mask over environmental destruction and degradation. As Roussell and Knowles (2020) point out, textbooks often contain ineffective or even erroneous information pertaining to climate change. However, through analyzing and critiquing UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Standards (ESD) as well as the social and educational science "ABC" theories Karlstad University professor David Olsson (2022) seeks to offer a solution to this problem by promoting textbooks that encourage change on an individual student-based level. Furthermore, Olsson draws from his educational and societal research to posit that education that focuses on individual lifestyle choices in reference to global impacts can spark action on the part of the student. In my opinion, such a view complicates as well as enriches efforts to depoliticize education as it forces those seeking change to focus on systemic as well as individual action during the climate crises. This view is strengthened by Roussell and Knowles (2020) who argue that students must be able to individually interact with the climate centered media and literature they consume in order to affect their own "cultural behavior." Perhaps the way to truly affect such cultural behavior will be to critique the politicization of environmental education in Idaho at the state standard level, the educator level, and at the student level in order to reinvent and reshape the materials as well as the curriculum students are given.

### **Proposed Line of Inquiry**

Thus the problem I will seek to explore and address is how politicization has worked its way into environmental education in Idaho and what the impacts of such politicization have on students in Idaho and in the greater United States. Specifically I will be focusing on how writing serves as a mechanism of resistance for student organizations to take initiative on climate education in Idaho. As mentioned previously, Idaho-based student organizations like the local chapter of the Sunrise Movement and the Save the Snake Movement, utilize social media and writing to spread messages that urge action against climate change. In order to address and understand this problem, I will be focusing upon the factors that play into the politicization of education and the student responses to it, including but not limited to: state educational standards, voting patterns, individual teacher understanding and bias, and individual student action based upon knowledge learned both in and outside the classroom.

My research and work will seek to add to the academic conversation surrounding the politicization of environmental education by specifically focusing on this machine's role in Idaho and the student organizations that have originated in Idaho. Extensive scholarly research has been done on environmental education internationally, domestically, as well as in political "powerhouse" states such as Texas and California (Khalidi and Ramsey 2021). But there is a gap in research when it comes to considering rural states, particularly those in the West. Thus, I seek

to add an underrepresented perspective to the academic conversation by studying and expressing the unique situation Idaho is in as an extremely conservative state that continues to both economically and socially gain from its environment, while failing to educate students on how to preserve it. Adding Idaho to the environmental and academic conversation is important to me, because as a student who went through Idaho's public education system, I care about the environment and the future of sustainable ecological and climate systems for my generation and the generations that come after us. Gen Z has been handed an immense responsibility to solve the climate crisis that previous generations created. In order to tackle this responsibility, students from all states and countries, including rural underrepresented ones, must be entitled to environmental education that is not politicized.

## Research Questions

- How has writing been previously used by environmental activists in Idaho to encourage change in public policy and/or in school curriculum?
  - How does the future of Idaho's public lands and their use conflict with its current state curriculum of omitting the mention of climate change?
  - Should student organizations in Idaho focus more on spurring change in curriculum or change in policy when it comes to combating global warming?
  - What resources have youth activists in Idaho used to grow their knowledge of climate change outside of what is taught in the classroom?
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## References

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