

Testimony on: Sustainability (Energy Use) Policy
Organization: Climate Parents of Prince George's
Position: Support
Date: August 18, 2022



Dear Board of Education:

Thank you for considering our testimony in support of the PGCPS Sustainability (Energy Use) Policy. Climate Parents is a campaign to reduce climate change-causing pollution in our schools, increase the climate resilience of our school infrastructure and capacity, and benefit the children, educators, and staff that will be impacted by a changing climate. Our group is active in Prince George's County. In particular, we worked directly with Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) technical staff and other advocates to develop a Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) for PGCPS as part of a Board of Education Focus Workgroup.

The PGCPS Sustainability Policy is an important effort to internalize the recommendations from the CCAP in the executive functions of PGCPS. It is so encouraging to see CEO Goldson act so quickly to begin to internalize the recommendations of the CCAP and overall the PGCPS Sustainability Policy is quite strong. It touches on all eight of the priority recommendations from the CCAP. For many of them it is almost complete in its look at implementation, though we do have a few recommendations on additions to some. Of course we do realize that the PGCPS Sustainability Policy is a document that will be updated every two years so there certainly are aspects of the CCAP that are not ready for this policy and though we did not comment on them, we would hope to see them in the next iteration.

#1: Support Environmental Justice Through Climate Curriculum, Training, and Partnerships

It obviously is required that PGCPS comply with the Maryland Environmental Literacy Standards (MELS), but it is encouraging the PGCPS will go beyond that, specifically the workgroup being created that lines up with the recommendation that a Climate Curriculum and Environmental Justice Work Group (CCEJWG) be implemented. This will be a boon to environmental education in PGCPS and hopefully be used as an avenue towards hosting an environmental leadership summit and increasing access of students to the tools and data created and collected through other aspects of the Sustainability Policy.

However, to strengthen the Sustainability Policy's attention to this priority area, we would like to encourage that the focus of the working group extend beyond consideration of the expected behaviors and norms needed to ensure compliance with PGCPS's new energy use guidelines. That is, we urge the working group to also consider relevant MELS entry points (e.g. Populations, Communities and Ecosystems; Environment and Society; etc.) that could facilitate engagement with climate and environmental justice topics as they relate to energy use. Such attention will help to ensure the focus on behavioral change and planetary health is complemented by a focus on social change and human well-being.

On this note, greater attention in the Sustainability Policy is needed to ensure curricular connections and teacher training opportunities are created to help bridge the implementation of greener energy,

infrastructure, and procurement activities on and around school campuses with conversations and learning opportunities happening inside classrooms.

#2: Reduce Carbon Footprint from PGCPS Buildings

The Sustainability Policy most fully will result in implementation in this priority recommendation. Items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 10 will all lead to implement this goal, which requires solid long-term planning. It is clear that PGCPS is undertaking such long-term planning with this policy. We would encourage a slight addition to item 10 to also look at funding under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and more so the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) since both likely have funds that can be put to good use in reducing PGCPS's building carbon footprint.

We also would note that at this point the Interagency Commission on School Construction (IAC) is expecting to propose rules to comply with HB 1290 and hope that in particular PGCPS can take advantage of the 5% increase in state funding for new buildings that are built net-zero that stems from that legislation.

#3: Commit to Renewable Energy Sources for a Net Zero Emissions Future

The Sustainability Policy also makes great strides in switching PGCPS over to a renewable energy future. Obviously, many of the efforts with buildings will also reduce electricity consumption and it is clear that this plan puts PGCPS on a path towards a clean electricity future. We also do hope that PGCPS will advocate for a 100% renewable portfolio standard in Maryland, which is expected to be an issue in the General Assembly this coming session, so that PGCPS does not have to pursue new renewable energy purchasing contracts independently.

#4: Commit to Low Carbon School Transportation

The Sustainability Policy undertakes the bold step of moving towards bus electrification and route simplification. This will lead to important health benefits for the students and reduce the impact of fuel budgets on PGCPS. We do have three additional recommendations in regards to the Sustainability Policy in regards to transportation. While it is clear that it has been occurring at PGCPS, it would be good to put in writing the need to apply for federal and state funds to purchase electric buses and infrastructure. It also is important to include language about refurbishing and planning bus lots, since a limiting factor for bus electrification is clearly the electrification and redesign of bus lots. Finally, it is important for PGCPS to comply with the Safe Walk to School Act (HB 19) that passed the General Assembly in 2022, and it is important to include the creation of pedestrian safety plans for new buildings in the Sustainability Policy.

#5: Reduce Food Waste and Grow Climate-Friendly Food

The Sustainability Policy makes an important step forward in reducing food waste through "baseline assessments for food waste to begin monitoring the reduction of food waste and prioritize the use of composting and the reuse and recycling of materials." However, in terms of climate-friendly food, the Sustainability Policy is lacking this consideration. We do realize that existing efforts are underway to survey populations on food preferences and thus that might not be included in the Sustainability Policy, though it would be beneficial to make it explicit. We also think that explicitly including language to encourage a loosening of the strict nature of on-site vegetable growing at school campuses may be a good first step towards the CCAP recommendation to "Create Resilient Food Production

on PGCPs Properties.” After all, there is growing evidence that healthier foods are also more sustainable foods, and that this is not just limited to the single ingredients we might use but also in multi-ingredient meal preparation that is often employed in schools.

Additionally, in line with investment in new buildings, though this was not specifically recommended in the CCAP we would encourage the Sustainability Policy to also introduce the need for new buildings to be constructed with scratch cooking facilities, so as PGCPs transitions to a more sustainable food production system, the necessary infrastructure is in place to do so.

#6: Commit to Sustainable Materials Management and Procurement

It is a great step that the Sustainability Plan takes the step to “investigate sustainable and environmentally preferable purchasing and management practices” though to better align with the CCAP this effort should go a small bit further and result in a sustainable purchasing policy.

#7: Commit to Climate Resilient Land Management

Again, the Sustainability Policy would put in place an important initial step towards achieving the goals of the CCAP, specifically to “Conduct a system-wide landscape inventory and develop a plan for green infrastructure and sustainable landscape management assets at every school and administrative building” and we commend PGCPs executive staff for that. At this initial phase though, it would be beneficial to also begin to implement policies to reduce the number of trees removed during construction of new and renovated schools and to streamline the green infrastructure installation process. That being said, the system-wide inventory is a crucial step that will underpin many of the recommendations in the CCAP that begin in the third year and must be undertaken and we are grateful for its inclusion.

#8: Lead by Example to Support Transformational Change

It is clear from the existence of the Sustainability Policy that PGCPs is leading on the issue and supporting transformational change in regards to climate change mitigation, adaptation, and education. That being said, we do wish that the Sustainability Policy discussed the need to make sure these improvements are distributed equitably throughout the county. It is also important that this Sustainability Policy results in the appointment of a Sustainability Officer to act as the point for implementation of the policy.

We also are encouraged to see that the policy should be reexamined every two years. This should provide the right balance towards keeping momentum going, while also allowing implementation of the steps outlined in the policy to occur.

Summary

While we do think some improvements can be made, this is an important step towards implementation of the Climate Change Action Plan and we encourage this policy to be adopted expeditiously. It covers all eight of the priority recommendations from the CCAP and for some of them almost fully covers all that would be expected. The Sustainability Policy will result in a healthier learning environment for the students and underpin the long-term success of the CCAP. We encourage the adoption of the Sustainability Plan, though also do encourage a few minor improvements be made.