

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY NOTES



School Environmental Justice as Social Justice

Environmental Justice (EJ) is a lens that can be used to ensure equitable access to healthy, safe, sustainable, and educationally appropriate school physical environments. This note provides an introduction to EJ principles, implications for schools, and relevant federal efforts.

Defining Environmental Justice

Federal Definition

The federal government defines EJ as “just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people (regardless of income, race, color, national origin, Tribal affiliation, or disability) in agency decision-making and other federal activities that affect human health and the environment so that people: (i) are fully protected from disproportionate and adverse human health and environmental effects (including risks) and hazards, including those related to climate change, the cumulative impacts of environmental and other burdens, and the legacy of racism or other structural or systemic barriers; and (ii) have equitable access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment in which to live, play, work, learn, grow, worship, and engage in cultural and subsistence practices.”¹

Principles of EJ

Communities with EJ concerns experience disproportionate and adverse human health or environmental burdens.² In 1991, attendees at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit drafted and adopted “The 17 Principles of Environmental Justice,” which set forth a unifying definition that grassroots movements have used in their efforts to improve EJ in their communities.³ The Principles state that EJ begins with ensuring the right to live free of environmental pollution and that policies be based on justice for all, removing bias and discrimination from environmental decision-making.



STUDENT AT ROBERT W. GADSDEN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
SAVANNAH, GA USES WATER
BOTTLE FILLING STATION

Environmental Justice and Schools

EJ principles offer a framework to consider equity in school buildings and grounds, as well as health and instruction. Poor conditions in school facilities lead to adverse health impacts such as asthma,

¹ Executive Office of the President. “Revitalizing Our Nation’s Commitment to Environmental Justice for All”. *Federal Register* 88, no. 80 (April 21, 2023): 25251-25261, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2023-08955>; see also US EPA. 2019. “Environmental Justice.” US EPA. February 6, 2019. <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>.

² The White House. 2023. “Executive Order on Revitalizing Our Nation’s Commitment to Environmental Justice for All.” The White House. April 21, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/04/21/executive-order-on-revitalizing-our-nations-commitment-to-environmental-justice-for-all/>.

³ “Principles of Environmental Justice.” 2019. Ejnet.org. 2019. <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>.

increased absenteeism, and impaired learning outcomes.⁴ Across the nation, the environmental health conditions of school facilities often correlate with socioeconomic status and race.⁵ EJ principles affect education in a variety of ways, such as:

Facilities and Operations: Examples of environmental injustices can be seen in the physical condition of facilities, such as inadequate access to clean water and air, poor heating and cooling systems, lack of emergency plans or backup equipment, unsafe or difficult to access transportation to and from school and resulting school closures.⁶

Health: Learning in areas with environmental health issues can cause physical health challenges, including stress and anxiety, and encumber academic outcomes.⁷ Children are vulnerable, due to their age and stage of development, to diseases that are exacerbated by environmental health risks such as asthma, lead-poisoning, and obesity.⁸

Legal: Schools and districts are responsible for meeting local, state, and federal health, safety, and environmental statutory and regulatory requirements. Failure to meet such requirements can impact human and environmental health and curtail teaching and learning.

An EJ lens also can be applied to ensure the equitable implementation of healthy, safe, educationally adequate, and sustainable 21st-century physical learning environments and environmental learning.

Federal Commitment to Ensuring Environmental Justice

In 1994, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, *Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations*,⁹ which sought to focus federal environmental and human health actions on minority and low-income communities. Nearly three decades later, the Biden-Harris Administration renewed its emphasis on EJ with the issuance of Executive Order 14096, *Revitalizing Our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All*,¹⁰ which further embeds EJ into the work of federal agencies to achieve measurable progress. Executive Order 14096 has sparked additional actions by the Administration, such as the Justice40 Initiative, which aims to provide 40 percent of the overall benefits from certain federal investments to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.¹¹

Also in 2023, the Biden-Harris Administration published [Phase One of the Environmental Justice Scorecard](#), the first government-wide assessment of federal agencies' efforts to advance EJ, including by the U.S. Department of Education. Engaged stakeholders are working to ensure this Administration's commitment to EJ benefits schools and students nationwide.

⁴ "School Buildings and Student Success." 2019. C-CHANGE | Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. January 10, 2019. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/news/school-buildings-and-student-success/>.

⁵ Filardo, Mary. 2021. Review of *2021 State of Our Schools: America's PK-12 Public School Facilities*. Washington, D.C.: 21st Century School Fund. <https://www.wellcertified.com/state-of-our-schools>.

⁶ "Schools." 2017. ASCE's 2021 Infrastructure Report Card |. January 17, 2017. <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/cat-item/schools-infrastructure/>.

⁷ EPA. 2023. "Climate Change and Children's Health and Well-Being in the United States." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA 430-R-23-001. <https://www.epa.gov/cira/climate-change-and-childrens-health-report>.

⁸ Landrigan, Philip J., Virginia A. Rauh, and Maida P. Galvez. 2010. "Environmental Justice and the Health of Children." *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine: A Journal of Translational and Personalized Medicine* 77 (2): 178–87. <https://doi.org/10.1002/msj.20173>.

⁹ Executive Office of the President. "Federal Actions To Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations". *Federal Register* 59, no. 32 (February 16, 1994): 7629-7633, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/94-3685>.

¹⁰ Executive Office of the President. "Revitalizing our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All". *Federal Register* 88, no. 80 (April 21, 2023): 25251-25261, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2023-08955>.

¹¹ The White House. 2022. "Justice40 Initiative." The White House. 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/environmentaljustice/justice40/>.

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