

[Giving students ‘a seat at the table’: Youth Climate Summit hosts schools for action plans to curb crisis](#)

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BUCKLAND — Nine Mohawk Trail Regional School eighth graders were among the more than 130 students from across western Massachusetts to attend a recent Youth Climate Summit, exploring how they can spearhead change to address the climate crisis.

“I thought it was important that young folks in Franklin County have a seat at the table to be thinking about ways to address climate change in their context,” said Brennan Tierney, a civics teacher who brought the students to the summit at Springfield Museums.

The Youth Climate Summit, sponsored by Mass Audubon, is a participant-driven educational conference for youths. It is designed to create an opportunity for learning, dialogue and action on climate change.

Participants attend workshops, tours and interactive sessions designed to provide a balance of factual information, tools for building confidence, and stories for inspiration and hope. As a culminating project, student teams develop an action plan for their high school to be implemented in the coming year with support from summit leaders.

At one workshop, “Strategies for Your School,” students explored sample projects and brainstormed their own ideas around transportation, local food and more. At another, students heard from Nipmuc leaders about traditional land stewardship practices and Indigenous knowledge, played games meant to help address conflict, and participated in a traditional stomp dance designed to build a sense of community and belonging.

Tierney said he brought his students to the summit in hopes they might find inspiration for civic action projects they will start next semester in accordance with state curriculum standards for eighth graders. The projects involve students choosing an issue, researching it, speaking with stakeholders, and developing and carrying out an action plan.

Climate change is one of many issues his students are interested in, Tierney said. With the recent flooding and heat waves, Tierney said his students have experienced climate change firsthand.

Tierney also teaches a unit about climate change in his civics class. While he does not teach the science around the issue, his instruction focuses on how local and state

governments respond to climate change. One example of this is a simulation of the permitting process to bring a waste incinerator to the fictional town of “Greenville.” This activity is meant to show the “shortfalls of the process in terms of democratic participation and justice questions,” he said.

This Youth Climate Summit was organized by a group of five students involved in Mass Audubon’s Youth Climate Leadership Program, including 16-year-old Ollie Mae Perrault, who is dual enrolled at Greenfield Community College as a high school student. Perrault said she observed the effects of climate change having grown up on a small farm in Easthampton. From that experience, she felt compelled to take action around climate change.

Perrault explained she is interested in transformative change with a focus on collective justice-oriented actions, pushing aside older ideas about helping the environment with “reduce, reuse, recycle” and carpooling campaigns.

“We cannot make a difference through preconceived systems of power. We need advocacy through new forms of rebellion to make an impact,” Perrault said. “We have to get creative.”

Perrault will be working with students who attended the climate summit to follow through with the action plans they come up with. Some ideas for projects include awareness initiatives involving art, starting new sustainability initiatives at their schools and joining other state initiatives that are already taking place.

“With issues with climate change, it can be daunting and overwhelming within a school year,” Tierney said. “The summit was a process to help make some ideas for what to do.”

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