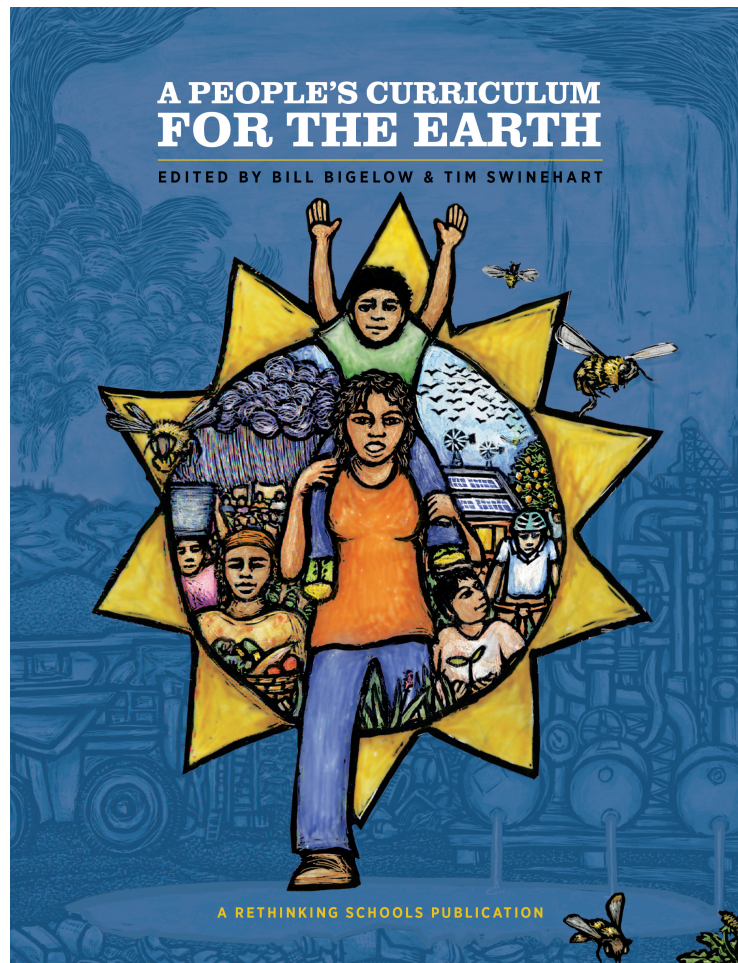


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Bringing Climate Into the Classroom: Inside a Teaching Retreat Around Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*

by Bill Bigelow, Alex Kelly, and Katie McKenna



PEOPLE'S CURRICULUM FOR THE EARTH COVER
ART: RICARDO LEVINS MORALES; DESIGN: NANCY ZUCKER

Jill Howdyshell lives and teaches 5th grade in Togiak, a small Yu'pik fishing village in southwestern Alaska. In Togiak, harvesting berries is a practice that goes back countless generations. The berries are the key ingredient in *akutaq*, called eskimo ice cream. In her classes, Howdyshell's students write identity poems with lines proclaiming "I am from *akutaq*," and describing cherished excursions with parents and grandparents. In 2014, residents discovered that there would be no berries that year: the tundra had not frozen for a sufficient length of time for the berries to regenerate. With a dramatic rise in temperatures, Yu'pik people can no longer rely on digging deep into the permafrost to store food in makeshift freezers. And most distressing: as a result of rising seas, during the next few years, Yu'pik people will be forced to relocate large parts of their community.

Climate change is tearing through Togiak, and Jill Howdyshell's students are living the effects: "Miss Jill, you know the water on the sea level used to be down here, and now it's all the way up here!" Given the stakes and immediacy of the crisis, you might expect that this environmental calamity would be part of the Alaskan school's curriculum. But you'd be wrong. As is true in schools throughout the United States, Togiak's curricular conversation is dominated not by the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change, and the underlying economic forces powering this crisis, but by the Common Core standards and the tests designed to evaluate students' success at reaching them, the "Alaska Measure of Progress."

Jill Howdyshell writes about the gap between her students' lived experience and curricular reality in an article she produced as part of a recent retreat to create critical classroom experiences that bring the social and economic impacts of the climate crisis to life. The retreat was hosted by the Zinn Education Project and *Rethinking Schools*, in partnership with the Naomi Klein book and Avi Lewis documentary project *This Changes Everything*.¹ Over three days in December 2014 in Portland, Oregon, twenty-two educators from across the United States came together to share stories, workshop ideas, and support each other in developing curriculum for their own and others' classes.

Klein's book argues that the failure to deal with climate change is because truly responding requires deep challenges to neoliberal economic orthodoxy through interventions like regulation, taxation, and collective action, but that the changes required to confront the crisis are also an opportunity to transform our economic system for the better, close the inequality gap, and deepen democratic engagement: "Climate change—if treated as a true planetary emergency—could become a galvanizing force for humanity, leaving us all not just safer from extreme weather, but with societies that are safer and fairer in all kinds of other ways as well. The resources required to move rapidly away from fossil fuels and prepare for the coming heavy weather could pull huge swaths of humanity out of poverty, providing services now sorely lacking, from clean water to electricity. This is a vision of the future that goes beyond just surviving or enduring climate change, beyond 'mitigating' and

'adapting' to it in the grim language of the United Nations. It is a vision in which we collectively use the crisis to leap somewhere that seems, frankly, better than where we are right now" (7).

Like Klein's previous works, *This Changes Everything* is research-driven and interdisciplinary, backed by over 800 endnotes drawn from climate science, history, psychology, and sociology, and paired with investigative reporting. Alongside the book, the broader *This Changes Everything* project seeks to break down silos between economic and climate thinking, teaching, and action through partnerships with movements and organizations like *Rethinking Schools*. Through consultation with educators the *This Changes Everything* project decided to develop classroom materials to assist teachers and students in connecting climate change to other issues.

Despite imaginative teaching on the climate throughout the United States and Canada, the official (and often corporate-sponsored) curriculum is mostly silent on the topic and often misleading in important ways. "The gap between our climate emergency and the attention paid to climate change in the school curriculum is immense," says Linda Christensen, director of the Oregon Writing Project, who co-led the writing retreat with *Rethinking Schools* curriculum editor Bill Bigelow. "With *This Changes Everything*, we saw an opportunity to help close that gap." In Portland, where the retreat took place, high school students take only one required course about the world: Modern World History. The adopted text is, not coincidentally, *Modern World History*, published by Holt McDougal, a subsidiary of the publishing behemoth, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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The authors of *Modern World History* bury discussion of climate change in just three paragraphs on page 679. In the edition of the book used by students, the second paragraph begins, "Not all scientists agree with the theory of the greenhouse effect."² The book acknowledges that the Earth's climate is "slowly warming," but adds: "To combat this problem, the industrialized nations have called for limits on the release of greenhouse gases. In the past, developed nations were the worst polluters." Evidently, to make sure that students get the point that the eco-criminals are the world's poor countries, the book adds: "So far, developing countries have resisted strict limits."

Other textbooks, even science textbooks, are still soaked in doubt about human-caused climate changes, and offer students a fundamentally incoherent grounding to begin to make sense of the changing world around them. Not content with their role in driving the climate crisis through enormous fossil fuel investments, the industrialist billionaires Charles and David Koch have funneled millions of their private fortunes to ensure that the very existence of climate change is hidden from students.

The Koch brothers fund the Arlington, Virginia-based Bill of Rights Institute, a “free market” curriculum outfit that produces text material and lesson plans that eschew any mention of climate change. The Institute offers free professional development workshops, sponsors student essay contests, and appears at major conferences like the National Council for the Social Studies. On the political front, the Koch-funded American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) has pushed what it calls the “Environmental Literacy Improvement Act,” a bill that aims to treat climate change (and evolution) as controversies, and would also make it a crime for teachers to attempt “to change student behavior, attitudes or values,” or to “encourage political action activities.” Texas, Louisiana, South Dakota, and Tennessee have passed versions of this legislation.



THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING PEDAGOGY RETREAT PARTICIPANTS, 2014
PHOTO: ALEX KELLY

Against this challenging backdrop, *Rethinking Schools* and the *This Changes Everything* team conceived the idea for a retreat to develop innovative materials inspired by the book and film to connect climate and economics in the classroom. A call was circulated in May 2014 and more than 170 educators applied to participate in the retreat, which sadly could only accommodate 18 in addition to retreat facilitators. The strong response from educators, even before *This Changes Everything* had been released, was heartening to us—it demonstrated the breadth of work going on across the United States to create critical material for students.

The retreat was held at the Menucha Conference Center, about 40 minutes up the Columbia River Gorge from Portland. It was an appropriate locale to explore a work that celebrates indigenous rights and the power of social movements. The Gorge is spectacularly beautiful—a designated National Scenic Area that for thousands of years has been the site of Native American fisheries and, since the 1800s, struggles over fishing rights. These continue. From our main meeting and writing room at Menucha, participants could look across to the Washington

side of the river and see mile-and-a-half long trains carrying coal from the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming to a coal-fired power plant near Centralia, Washington. In the hope of exporting coal to Asia, coal and rail companies want to expand these coal trains, and also barge coal down the Columbia, with a potentially devastating impact on Indigenous Peoples from the Gorge up the coast of Washington, where the Lummi people have been fighting a proposed coal export facility at Cherry Point, near Bellingham. And on the Oregon side below, so-called “bomb trains,” filled with highly flammable crude oil from the Bakken oil fields of North Dakota, head west along the Columbia River. So as we wrote about teaching capitalism and the climate, fronts in that war were playing out in the valley below.

Retreat participants came from all over: North Carolina, New York City, Alaska, Mississippi, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, southern California, New Mexico, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Portland. Some were teachers in their first years in the classroom, while others had taught for decades; most taught high school, but the group included elementary and middle school teachers and teacher educators.

“Most of the retreat participants had never met one another, so we started the retreat with a playful mixer. We also wanted participants to think about what they might want to write about, and how their own teaching intersected with Naomi Klein’s analysis,” said retreat co-facilitator Linda Christensen, herself a 40-year teaching veteran. We hoped that this initial activity would seed work that teacher-writers would launch over the weekend.

We gave each participant a couple of provocative quotes from *This Changes Everything*, including:

For a long time, environmentalists spoke of climate change as a great equalizer, the one issue that affected everyone, rich or poor. It was supposed to bring us together. Yet all signs are that it is doing precisely the opposite, stratifying us further into a society of haves and have-nots, divided between those whose wealth offers them a not insignificant measure of protection from ferocious weather, at least for now, and those left to the mercy of increasingly dysfunctional states.

And

... the climate moment offers an overarching narrative in which everything from the fight for good jobs to justice for migrants to reparations for historical wrongs like slavery and colonialism can all become part of the grand project of building a nontoxic, shockproof economy before it's too late.

To get people talking—about their own work, about potential writing or curriculum ideas, and about how these might align with Klein’s radical analysis—we gave participants eight “mixer” questions, and asked them to circulate through the room. These included:

Talk with another person about one of the quotes that they have from *This Changes Everything*. What's their reaction to the quote? Can either of you think of a way of teaching this idea to students, or helping them to explore it?

Find someone who has a story about students taking climate-related action. Talk about the kind of teaching that contributed to students taking this action. Who is the person and what did the person learn from this?

Find someone who had a teaching idea or "aha" while reading *This Changes Everything* or watching the *This Changes Everything* film. Who's the person; what's the idea?

As we anticipated, this was a lively session of idea- and story-sharing—although the mingling part was tough as people wanted to talk through ideas and flesh out lessons.

We followed by looking at several clips of Avi Lewis's forthcoming film, *This Changes Everything*. We wanted to get people thinking in curricular terms—about how they might use parts of the film with their own students—and so gave people model poems and interior monologues that might spark writing ideas. The following poem from Martín Espada was one model we shared with participants:

Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits
by Martín Espada³

*No one asks
where I am from,
I must be
from the country of janitors,
I have always mopped this floor.
Honduras, you are a squatter's camp
outside the city
of their understanding.

No one can speak
my name,
I host the fiesta
of the bathroom,
stirring the toilet
like a punchbowl.*

*The Spanish music of my name
is lost
when the guests complain
about toilet paper.*

*What they say
must be true:
I am smart,
but I have a bad attitude.*

*No one knows
that I quit tonight,
maybe the mop
will push on without me,
sniffing along the floor
like a crazy squid
with stringy gray tentacles.

They will call it Jorge.*

Many participants wrote from an especially poignant segment of the film in which Crystal Lameman, a leader of the Beaver Lake Cree First Nations people of Alberta, Canada, attempts to get access to ancestral land where she has heard there had been an oil spill. In the film, we watch as Lameman is patronized by a company official—"I'm sorry. Did I confuse you?"—as he denies her entry to Beaver Lake Cree land.

Retreat participant Alma McDonald, who teaches in Mississippi, wrote her persona poem from Crystal Lameman's point of view:

*I stated my name and made my demand.
I have the right to be here because this is tribal land.

I needed to see the land and put my mind at ease.
So excuse me sir, could you step aside please?

He looked down at me, like I was dirt on his shoes
and had the nerve to ask me, if I was confused.

I was shocked and appalled and highly offended.
How dare he treat me like I'm some dumb Indian?

No, sir I'm not confused. In fact, I see clearly.
We trusted the treaty and it has cost us dearly.*

We said you could use the land to the depth of a plow. But you decided to claim ownership, and screw us somehow.

Am I confused? No, not in the least. We didn't give you the deed. You only signed a lease.

17,000 ways you've violated our trust. And now we're Idle no more and demand you hear us.

Participants then shared their poems and monologues in small groups and some volunteered—or were volunteered—to read theirs to the full group. “It was a simple, yet powerful exercise,” said Mark Hansen, co-director of the Oregon Writing Project, and one of the leaders of the small group sessions. “We continued the process of getting to know one another, but also helped teachers imagine how they might use part of the film with students—it moved the group into ‘thinking in the language of curriculum.’”

In previous *Rethinking Schools* writing retreats, the transition from brainstorming to writing was somewhat more straightforward. Most teachers came with definite article ideas and the facilitators’ task was to draw those out in story. But early in this writing retreat, we discovered that Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* had led most people to rethink their own curricula, and people came less wanting to write about teaching they had already done than to construct new curriculum based on the book and the film, which participants had previewed prior to the retreat. Of course, we had urged people to come to the retreat with ideas about articles or curriculum that they might want to write about, but we knew that *This Changes Everything*, well, changed everything. People were evaluating their curriculum in terms of Klein’s analysis and imagining curricular approaches that could “translate” this analysis for their students. All at the same time.

We asked people to write about what they intended to work on during the retreat. As facilitators, we shared some of our own curriculum ideas, hoping to offer examples for ways to link aspects of the book and film with imaginative and participatory teaching strategies. At this early stage of writing, we were looking for an exploration into new curriculum. Participants could describe something in the book or film that they wanted to bring to life for students. They could tell a story about how they had approached the climate crisis with their students, or how they had taught about capitalism, “extractivism,” or the new “blockadia” movements, as Klein dubs them, which are resisting the commodification of nature.

Teacher-writers shared these write-ups in small groups after dinner—we wrote or met each day until at least 9 pm—and group members offered one another careful political and curricular feedback, all of which seeded writing for the rest of the three days. The remainder of our time together was spent writing and honing both articles and curriculum. We had no expectation that everyone would complete a polished draft over the weekend, but we intended for people to get a running start on curriculum that they could teach and that could be turned into articles with support from *Rethinking Schools* editors in the months following the retreat.

We have been inspired by the diversity and depth of articles and curriculum that participants are working on. Some of these include:

—In creating her role play on “Island Blockadia,” Portland teacher and *Rethinking Schools* editorial associate Moé Yonamine, has assembled a remarkable collection of stories from Pacific Island activists describing the impact of climate change and imperialism—including Okinawa, where Yonamine was born and still has family—but also people’s resistance. One role from the point of view of Samoan activist, Koreti Tiumalu describes her work challenging, in particular, Australia’s promotion of coal:

Thirty activists took part in the Pacific Climate Warriors tour to build and transport traditional canoes to Australia. This was symbolic because we were trying to show that our Pacific Island communities have been living sustainably off the land for generations and yet we are now the ones being affected by climate change. We want to share our traditional knowledge of our warrior history to help guide all of us in stopping the destruction of our islands today—to use traditional skills and knowledge as a way to tell that story. We picked Australia because Australia is considered a “big brother” to the Pacific. It makes no sense that our big brother is not contributing to the preservation of our Pacific Island nations, but rather is the biggest exporter of coal in the Pacific. I think most Australians must not know how much impact the coal industry has on our Pacific Islands. Because if they did, I believe they would demand climate justice for the whole region.

Yonamine’s role play centers around a “Pacific Island Forum” to discuss the effects of climate change, militarism, and imperialism on Island peoples and to fashion demands of the so-called “big brother” nations of Australia and New Zealand, as well as the broader international community.

—Rosa Rivera Furumoto is writing about her work with about 25 Latina *promotoras*, all mothers, mostly immigrants, in the San Fernando Valley in southern California, to nurture consciousness and activism around climate change and capitalism. As Furumoto describes, the women “serve as a liaison between community members and other organizations and service providers, similar to the health *promotora* model often used in Latin America.” Furumoto writes about how she is striving to incorporate families’ cultural values and traditions into the work. She writes: “Our idea is that when you reach the mother you reach the entire family, as she is the heart or center in most Latina/o families.”

—New York City teacher Rosie Frascella is teaching and writing about her blending of Klein’s description of “sacrifice zones” with the Black Lives Matter movement: “*This Changes Everything* highlights the extreme risks connected to extreme energy. She writes, ‘Running an economy on energy sources that release poisons as an unavoidable part of their extraction and refining has always required sacrifice zones—whole subsets of humanity

categorized as less than fully human, which made their poisoning in the name of progress somehow acceptable.’ This idea of a sacrifice zone not only applies to the extraction of resources in the energy sector, but in the entire capitalist and private sector. We see examples of sacrifice zones when it comes to over-policing, emergency responses to natural disasters, and other forms of public ‘safety.’” Frascella’s curriculum introduces a series of “sacrifice zones” and asks students to reflect on critical questions: Who lives there? Who doesn’t? What is being sacrificed? Who benefits from the sacrifice? She focuses on the corporate media’s portrayal of sacrifice zones and counter-narratives missing from the corporate media but articulated by grassroots organizations.

Once these lessons have been tested in classrooms they will be available to other teachers to use and adapt; some will be published in *Rethinking Schools* magazine and posted on the *This Changes Everything* and Zinn Education Project websites.

In March three retreat participants from New York



CHILDREN AT THE PEOPLE’S CLIMATE CHANGE MARCH, SEPTEMBER 21, 2014, NYC. PHOTO: LEONARD VOGT

presented a “Teaching *This Changes Everything*” workshop at the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCORE) conference. The workshop was full and enthusiastically received by a mix of student teachers, newer teaching graduates, and veteran radicals, again demonstrating the demand for curriculum with a strong economic and political analysis and for tools to explore and teach these concepts in the classroom. This gathering was followed up by a day-long workshop for activists and teachers in Brooklyn, focused around activities included in *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis*, and which included excerpts from the forthcoming film, *This Changes Everything*.

Later this year similar workshops will be held at the annual *National Council for the Social Sciences* (NCSS) conference and other education gatherings. We hope that this partnership and the teaching resources that this network of teachers creates become part of the curriculum conversation, both to put tools into hands of students who will be living through the intense impacts of the climate crisis and to challenge the narrow curriculum about

environment and economic issues currently available in classrooms across the United States and Canada.

We are committed to working with teachers to create materials that encourage solutions-oriented thinking in their classrooms. One fundamental problem with the curricular enterprise of the Koch brothers and corporate textbook giants like Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Pearson is that the corporate project requires ideological obfuscation. Textbooks like *Modern World History* fail to help students think systemically, and to name the role of the capitalist system in pushing the climate crisis forward. The texts may talk in terms of the role of “industrialized nations” and “developing countries,” but they fail to mention, let alone interrogate, the nature of the global economic system. By contrast, the curriculum that the partnership between *Rethinking Schools*, Zinn Education Project, and *This Changes Everything* is developing aims explicitly to equip students to recognize the underlying ideas and impacts of the choices that confront humanity as we seek solutions to the climate crisis.



As Rosie Frascella demonstrates through her lessons with her students, our curriculum needs to ask whose land and lives fall into the sacrifice zones of global capitalism and why? How does the regime of neoliberalism affect the rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and what alternative ideology is needed to rein in greenhouse gas emissions? By providing students with the tools to understand and critique how and why decisions are made, how power works and is wielded, and how change can happen, we hope to contribute to building a more engaged populace, better armed to confront the impacts of climate change.

Climate change and capitalism are complex and contested systems with vast spin surrounding their definitions and impacts, not to mention the sometimes wonky nature of the economic and scientific language used to explore them. This complexity can make them daunting for both educators and students to approach. This is further reflected in the lack of adequate responses, in inertia, and in denial of climate change more broadly in society. Starting from an exploration of the values and

decisions that are driving the global response to climate change we hope that students can start to explore how power in our economic and political systems works—and doesn't work. By working with teachers to create lessons inspired by *This Changes Everything* that can unpack the philosophy, values, and stories behind the science and these systems it is our hope that we can make them more accessible as it is so critical that these ideas are in our classrooms.

At our Menucha writing retreat in December, we held a Skype conversation with Naomi Klein, who joked that one response she gets in her presentations is, "Climate change was already a heavy lift. Did you have to go and make it about capitalism, too?!" It's a question teachers might ask ourselves: Teaching climate change is not sufficiently daunting, we also have to investigate capitalism? But if the role of education—especially *radical* education—is to get to root causes of problems, and to use that inquiry to reflect on genuine and fundamental solutions, then we are led inexorably to the nature of our economic system. And, as Klein argues, it is not as if the current economic system is currently working for the vast majority of people. Connecting these two crises might just be the way to truly face up to and transform them.

And we can do this in ways that are playful, participatory, and not the least bit preachy. For example, an activity included in *A People's Curriculum for the Earth* focuses on La Vía Campesina, the world's largest social movement, which unites 164 peasant and farm organizations from 73 countries, with a combined membership of more than 200 million. (Good luck finding a single mention of La Vía Campesina in any mainstream textbook.) A role play that features six constituent La Vía Campesina organizations helps students articulate a critique of the market-driven approach of the WTO, Monsanto and other agribusiness corporations, the United States and G7 governments, the World Bank/IMF, et al., and to imagine alternatives grounded in global solidarity, agroecology, and local and democratic cooperation. In the role play, students enact the La Vía Campesina maxim of "no negotiation without mobilization" and create manifestos, slogans, and posters challenging the entire neoliberal approach to food and farming. One poster from the Mozambican Peasant Union (UNAC) during a recent role play summed up the La Vía Campesina approach: "Food for the Many, Not for the Money." The activity's writing debrief explicitly asks students how their La Vía Campesina "program" addresses a range of issues—from public health to global inequality to forced migration to climate change. These connections are easy for students to make because they have *experienced* them in class, through connecting with other La Vía Campesina organizations, and directly confronting the export-driven, privatized, techno-approaches of agribusiness and G7 governments.

In activities like this, students can explore the dynamics of capitalism—and challenges to capitalism—not through dry economics texts, or abstract discussions about capitalism vs. socialism, but through classroom activities that bring these dynamics to life.

Of course, as always, teachers need to read the political context of their particular school and school district to decide which activities make sense to use with their students. The suffocating test-and-punish regime in schools—especially the new Common Core-aligned SBAC and PARCC tests, whose results are increasingly tied to teacher evaluations—may discourage some teachers from attempting this kind of teaching. But the spring of 2015 was a Spring of Resistance, with widespread student walkouts and opt-outs from standardized tests, and a revival of teachers insisting that we have the right to teach about what matters in the world and in our students' lives. And the vitality of grassroots curriculum exchanges—e.g., the San Francisco Teachers 4 Social Justice, Milwaukee's Educators Network for Social Justice, the New York Collective of Radical Educators, the Northwest Teaching for Social Justice conference, Free Minds/Free People, and many more—make this a good time to critique the biases of the official curriculum and promote alternatives.

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When we say "this changes everything," we mean that in terms of the kind of curriculum that will help students probe the causes and consequences of the climate crisis. But we also mean it with respect to the relationships we must build between educators and activists. The collaboration between *This Changes Everything, Rethinking Schools*, and the Zinn Education Project is one gesture in that direction. As educators, we need to draw on the insights and experiences of on-the-ground "blockadia" activists, whose resistance is giving us a fighting chance to reorient the world away from fossil fuels and toward equality. As activists, we need to reach out to the educators who will equip young people with the scientific, analytic, and activist tools that will allow them to join the movement for climate justice even before they leave school.

Naomi Klein observes that "the movement we need is already in the streets; in the courts; in the classrooms; even in the halls of power—we just need to find each

other. One way or another, everything is going to change. And for a brief time, the nature of that change is still up to us.” We hope our collaboration contributes to this critical movement.

NOTES

¹Founded in 1986, *Rethinking Schools* is a quarterly magazine and publisher with a mandate to inspire and inform critical teaching for social justice. Some of the organization’s influential books include *Rethinking Columbus*; *Rethinking Our Classrooms*; *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*; *Rethinking Mathematics*; and the latest on environmental justice themes, *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth*. In 2007, at the initiation of historian-activist Howard Zinn and a former student of Zinn’s, *Rethinking Schools* partnered with the nonprofit Teaching for Change to launch the Zinn Education Project, an online resource that today provides almost 50,000 teachers with more than a hundred free “outside the textbook” history lessons. Inspired by the success of the Zinn Education Project, the team behind *This Changes Everything* reached out to *Rethinking Schools* and Teaching for Change to develop a similar partnership. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014) is the most recent book by renowned Canadian journalist and activist Naomi Klein (*No Logo*, *The Shock Doctrine*), with a companion documentary film by Avi Lewis (*The Take*) to be released in late 2015.

²Likely because of critical articles in *Rethinking Schools*, this line was omitted in the 2012 edition—too late for the tens of thousands of students throughout the country who use earlier editions—but the rest of the awful three paragraphs remains.

³From *Rebellion Is The Circle of a Lover’s Hands* (Poems), by Martín Espada (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Books, 1990). Reprinted with permission of the author.



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