



*Connecting People with Nature*

# Audubon Society of Rhode Island

May 2, 2023

Representative Marvin Abney  
Chair, House Committee on Finance  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, RI 02908

## **Re: In Support of H6008 Foundation Level School Support, Net-Zero Schools**

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Committee on Finance,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H6008 on behalf of Audubon Society of Rhode Island and our 17,000 members and supporters. We thank Representatives Handy, McNamara, Cortvriend, Boylan, Tanzi, Edwards, Hull, Speakman, Fogarty, and Henries for introducing this important legislation that will move Rhode Island towards **Green and Healthy Schools**<sup>1</sup>.

In my professional capacity, I serve as both as the Senior Director of Government Affairs at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island and the Co-chair of the Climate Jobs Rhode Island Coalition.

For over 125 years, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island has worked to protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats through conservation, education, and advocacy, for the benefit of people and all living things. **Audubon's recent strategic plan is entirely built around the climate crisis.** Through this plan, Audubon has committed to direct all our organizational priorities towards addressing the climate crisis, which led Audubon to co-lead the effort to mobilize advocates and Rhode Islanders to support the passage of the 2021 Act On Climate. **This also led Audubon to join environmental partners and labor to form Climate Jobs Rhode Island.** A partnership between labor and environmental groups working together toward a Just Transition to a Green Economy in Rhode Island. Our first shared goal was to establish science-based mandatory and enforceable emissions limits leading to economy-wide 100% net-zero emissions by 2050, with significant, measurable progress before 2030.

**This legislation aligns with our shared principle of significantly reducing carbon emissions by 2030—the first interim target of reducing carbon emissions by 45% economy-wide—and provides Rhode Island a tangible path to meeting our Act-On Climate goals.** Decarbonizing and modernizing our public school buildings by 2030 is low-hanging fruit and should be a high priority for early climate action. And as we work to decarbonize our building sector, this is a critical and necessary climate action step.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://climatejobsri.org/green-and-healthy-schools/>

**In summary, Audubon supports H6008 for some of the following reasons:**

- Requires every public school building to be net zero by 2035.
- Strong labor standards to ensure pathways to family-sustaining jobs for communities who need them the most.
- Enables school districts to pursue other sources of funding without reductions in school construction aid.
- Significant incentives for energy efficiency and renewable energy improvements.
- One new FTE at the School Building Authority who can serve as an energy modeler for projects and assist OPMs with net-zero-project scoping, engineering, and modeling.
- Directive for school districts to seek IRA incentives for the purposes of owning, operating, and maintaining renewable energy systems.

And all of the above puts into tangible action the recent recommendations of a report authored by Cornell University, Building a Just Transition for a Resilient Future: A Climate Jobs Program for Rhode Island<sup>2</sup>.

**Furthermore, this proposal allows the state to take tangible climate action by rebuilding our crumbling public school buildings to be net-zero and targeting the first investments in communities that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and health risks.** Making carbon free schools a reality, will support the creation of thousands of good union careers, and provide the state with an opportunity to advance racial equity by prioritizing investments and workforce development in communities who have suffered from decades of disinvestment impacting every facet of life, including health, housing, heat and pollution exposure—our frontline communities and environmental justice communities who tend to be Black, Indigenous, people of color, and low-income communities, and continue to experience deep inequities heighten throughout the pandemic. For example, in Rhode Island, 10.9% of children have asthma—the 9th highest prevalence in the nation—and students—disproportionately young people of color—miss approximately 14 million school days per year due to asthma as asthma triggers like mold and allergens are common in schools.

Lastly, the state also has the opportunity to: pass on substantial savings to school districts as we do deeper energy efficiency retrofits; rebuilt school buildings without fossil fuels, carbon-free, and instead power them with clean energy. And working together, we can integrate strong labor standards into this climate action step and all clean energy solutions.

The fastest we can move this proposal forward, the sooner we'll see healthier kids with brighter futures and healthier communities. Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,



Priscilla De La Cruz  
Senior Director of Government Affairs

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<sup>2</sup> <https://climatejobsri.org/cornell-report-page/>