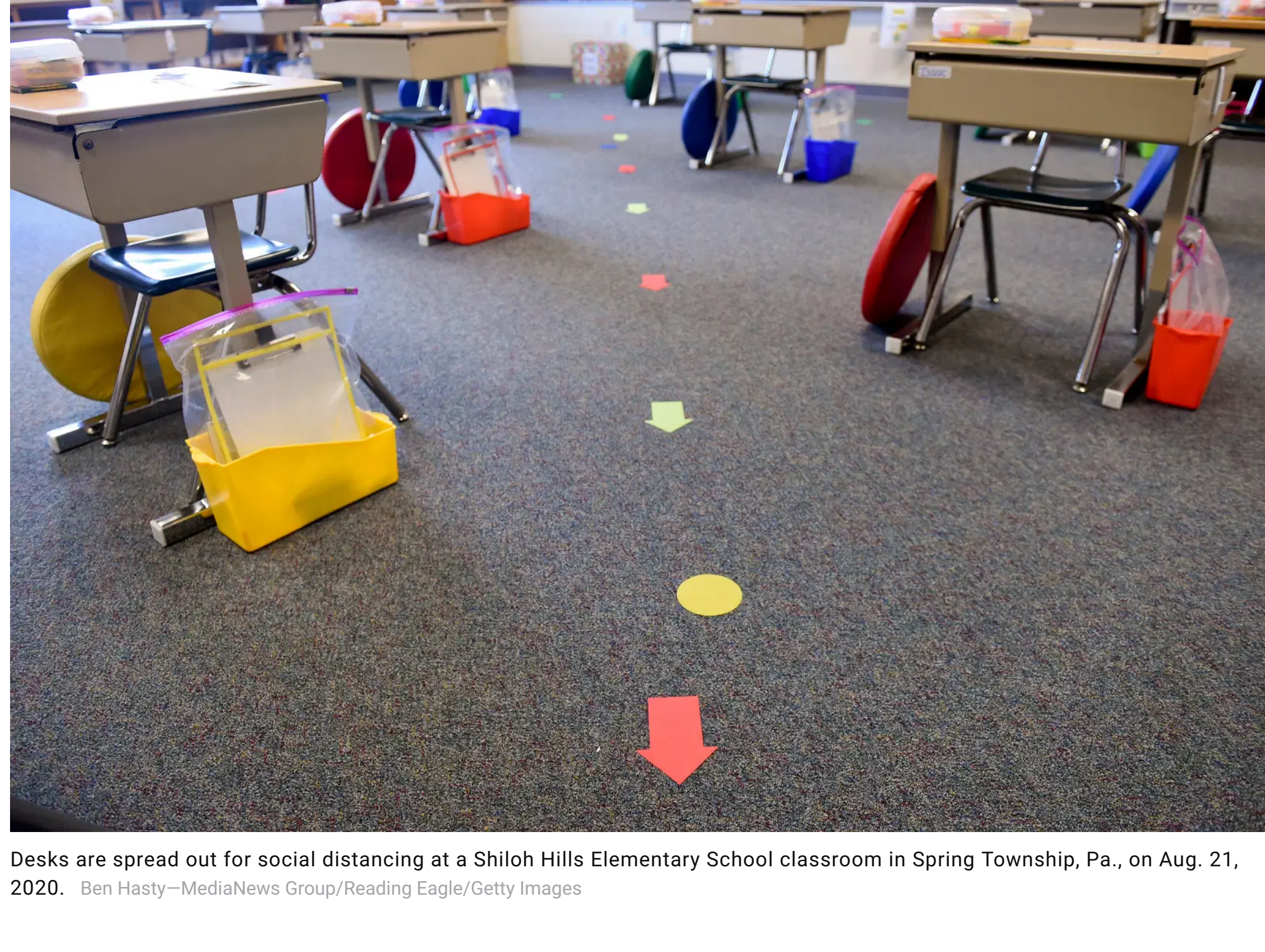


TIME 2030

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Now Is Our Chance to Rebuild U.S. Public Schools To Address Both Climate Change and Racial Inequality



Desks are spread out for social distancing at a Shiloh Hills Elementary School classroom in Spring Township, Pa., on Aug. 21, 2020. Ben Hastly—MediaNews Group/Reading Eagle/Getty Images

BY AKIRA DRAKE RODRIGUEZ, ERIKA KITZMILLER AND DANIEL ALDANA COHEN

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IDEAS

When school facilities closed for in-person learning in early March 2020, the assumption was that the shutdown and pandemic would be temporary blips in the memory of our students. Some 16 months later, school facilities are finally preparing to re-open for in-person learning. We could go about business as usual, but after the devastation of the pandemic, and the increasingly widespread climate-change-linked weather disasters, it's obvious we should not. Emerging from the crisis of COVID-19 gives us an opportunity to rethink our public schools, to simultaneously the structural inequalities that pervade the system, and prepare it for the climate emergency ahead.

Lawmakers have had difficulty grappling with the layering of immediate and longer-lasting crises. That's where we think the **Green New Deal for Public Schools**, introduced to Congress by Representative Jamaal Bowman (NY) on July 16, comes in. Building on the research of our **climate + community project**, its basic premise is that we have to tackle our society's gravest problems not one by one, but in their entirety, through ambitious physical and social investments that lift up the workers and communities that have suffered the most disinvestment throughout American history. We want to fight systemic racism, poverty, and environmental breakdown with comprehensive, holistic policies.

The legislation authorizes \$1.4 trillion in spending over the next decade to upgrade and decarbonize every public school in the U.S. with new solar panels, batteries, and green retrofits, while also investing in adequate staffing levels for every vulnerable school in the country. By greening schools, we can create centers of climate resilience infrastructure in every community and help to address the legacy of educational inequity that creates an uneven landscape of public schools.

The bill would cut annual carbon pollution by the amount **equivalent to taking 17 million cars** off the road, eliminate health toxins (like mold and lead) in school facilities, and provide decent staff-to-student ratios in every school. We estimate that this would create over 1.3 million jobs per year, including 272 million skilled construction and maintenance jobs. With this level of public green investment, the government would provide a massive boost to the workers and businesses who will green the entire country's building stock in the decades ahead. Every American would benefit from lower costs and technological improvements.

For years, **educational advocates** at the **local, state, and federal level**, have been pushing the federal government and other leaders to **improve school facility conditions**. In 2020, nearly 25 years **after the last census of school facility conditions**, the Government Accountability Office **issued a report** estimating that about 54% of public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems in their schools. An estimated 41% of districts need to update or replace heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems in at least half of their schools. The American Society of Civil Engineers has estimated that schools need **nearly \$400 billion** dollars in investment over the next decade just to operate at a decent level, without even accounting for the climate crisis.

The shortcomings affect educational outcomes. **Research** demonstrates that extreme heat and ineffective cooling systems directly contribute to poorer educational outcomes. In recent years, millions of K-12 students **have missed** school due to extreme temperatures and inadequate heating and cooling systems; research suggests investment in centralized air conditioning could mitigate the disparity in **educational performance** between schools with adequate HVAC systems and those without by up to 73%. School cancellations have **disproportionately impacted school facilities** in the least affluent and least white communities, due to the country's documented redlining practices.

The pandemic exposed an intersectional crisis of care as low-income, nonwhite women and **their households** experienced the highest rates of **fatalities, unemployment, disability, exposure, and isolation**. They also bore the brunt of COVID-19 public school closures due to decades of underinvestment in their children's public schools. Educators and their unions, who clearly understood the risks of in-person learning in substandard school facilities, **rightfully challenged** plans to reopen school buildings as COVID-19 surged last winter. The teachers' efforts were not in vain: **many parents are now reconsidering** sending their children back into school facilities until these aging HVAC systems are repaired.

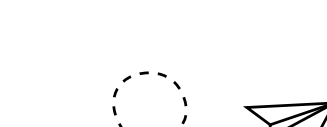
Meanwhile, our **research** suggests that many educators across the country are reconsidering their careers given the stress of this past year as they had to react to ever-changing school district directives, care for their students even more than usual, all while being blamed for the downsides of remote learning. This is especially true in less affluent and less white communities, where paltry spending and underinvestment in public education has had a profound effect on **labor conditions** for teachers and staff. The reopening of schools today is an opportunity to alleviate this potential crisis of care.

Using the CDC's Social Vulnerability Index and national student-to-teacher ratios, The Green New Deal for K-12 Schools directs resources to public schools and communities that federal, state, and local officials have overlooked for decades. Indeed, the \$1.4 trillion dollars that the bill calls for over the next decade would use grants to fund schools in the bottom third of those rankings to reify their school facilities, with \$250 billion earmarked to shore up the **leaky teacher pipeline**, improve local curriculum and program development, and to install the needed mental and physical health professionals in our K-12 facilities.

Each year, the country's K-12 public schools educate over 50 million students. We cannot continue to teach them, and to force educators to labor in outdated facilities with unreliable systems that produce substandard economic, educational, and health outcomes. We cannot abandon schools to toxic building systems while the rest of the economy is greened. And we cannot continue to perpetuate inequality in our schools, with only affluent, and mostly white, communities benefiting from adequate investment. The Green New Deal for Public Schools is, we believe, the best way forward for our public schools, that transforms how we conceive, design, and use this critical neighborhood infrastructure of care for a healthy and green future.

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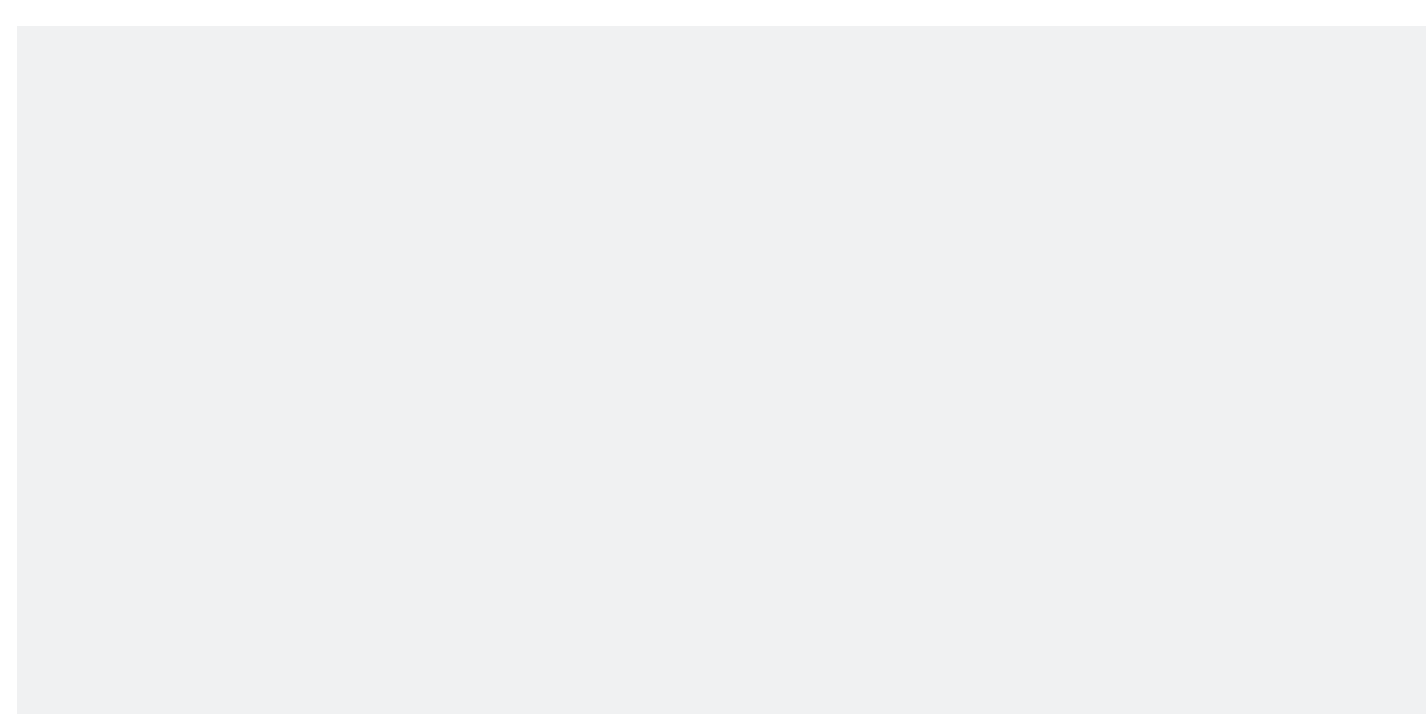
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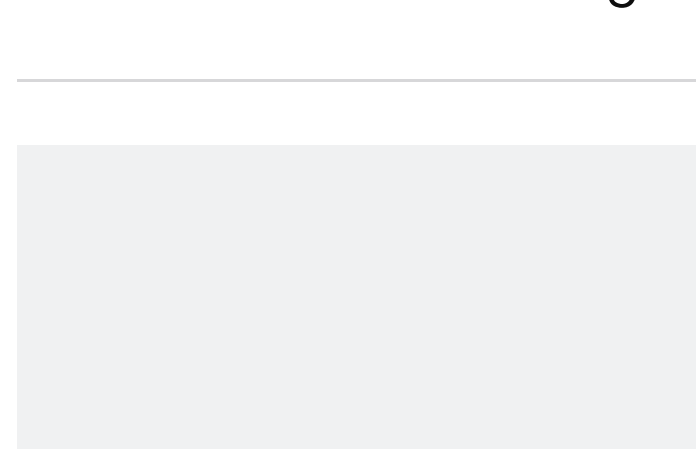
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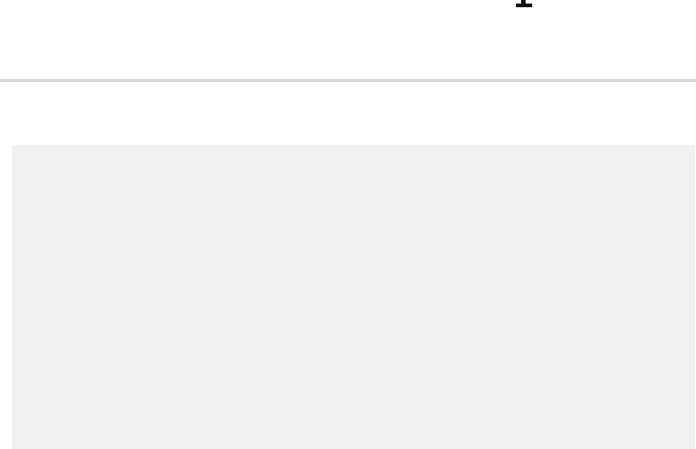
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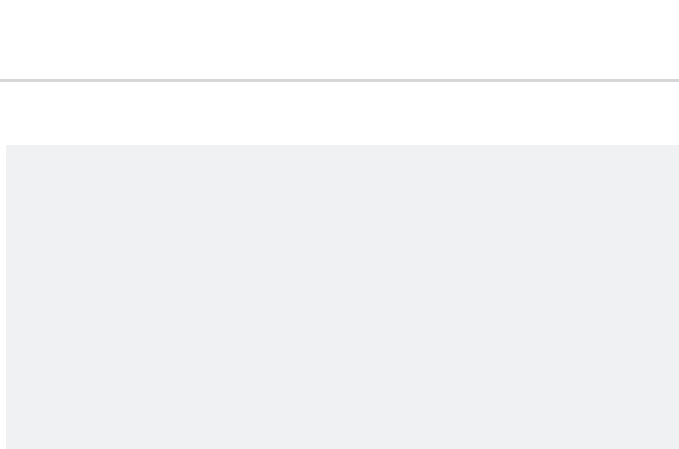
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