



County Offices of Education (COE) as Catalysts for Regional Change Towards Sustainable and Climate Ready Schools: Successes and Opportunities for an Equitable Approach for All Schools

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This document provides an overview for educational leaders, policy makers, and funders to understand what a regional Environmental Literacy (and/or Sustainable and Climate Ready Schools) Initiative is, and why County Offices of Education (COE) are critical for taking efforts to scale across California.

Momentum has been building quickly across California since 2017, with at least ten (10) County Offices of Education (COE) investing in Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Coordinator positions, and/or launching Environmental Literacy (and/or Sustainable and Climate Ready Schools) Initiatives, and 30 more COEs expressing interest in doing more. Counties who have already made this investment have been able to accelerate transformative change within school communities, and helped move their schools towards providing equitable access to safe and healthy spaces for children, youth, and adults to learn and play; as well as begun to graduate students who are better prepared for green college and career pathways. In order to see environmental literacy, sustainability, and climate resilience become systemically integrated into California's K-12 education system, investments need to be made at both the state and local level.

This document has been developed by COEs who are on the leading edge of this work, and provides answers to the frequently asked questions about how to do systemic integration of environmental literacy, sustainability, and climate ready practices into California's K-12 education system. The document is organized into the following frequently asked question segments:

- I. [What is the decade of action, and how have K-12 schools responded to the call to action?](#)
- II. [How is the CA Education system organized, and what role do COEs play within this structure?](#)
- III. [Why are COEs a good leverage point for change in developing sustainable and climate ready schools?](#)
- IV. [What does an environmental literacy and sustainability initiative look like at a COE, and what is the role of an environmental literacy and sustainability coordinator?](#)
- V. [What is the financial investment needed to launch a sustainable and climate ready schools initiative at a COE?](#)
- VI. [Which CA COEs are engaging with environmental literacy, environmental sustainability, and climate ready schools work?](#)
- VII. [What can educational leaders, decision makers, and funders do to help further the systemic integration of this work in the K-12 Education system?](#)

I. WHAT IS THE DECADE OF ACTION, AND HOW HAVE K12 SCHOOLS BEGUN TO RESPOND?

The United Nations has referred to the 2020s, as the "[Decade of Action](#)" — or a reinvention of life intended to thrust humanity into a more sustainable paradigm by 2030. This paradigm aims to support humans across the globe to live in ways that are environmentally sustainable, socially just, and economically viable. Additionally, the paradigm shift requires mitigating further human exacerbated global warming, and adapting to the already existing impacts of climate change.

This disruptive shift to the status quo has already begun as evidenced by a shift in practices and operations in many sectors, including government, business and industry, higher education, and faith-based organizations; as well as a shift in public perception around the need for action on environmental crises. A key part of these shifts have been an ***investment in staffing models and initiatives that can support the change management process for integrating principles and practices of environmental sustainability and climate resilience into organizations and geographical regions.***

Currently, the K-12 education system lags significantly behind the progress seen in other sectors in its adoption of sustainability and climate ready staff and initiative. However, many efforts at the national and state level indicate that **sustainable and climate ready efforts in schools have become an important strategy for minimizing disruptions to learning, and providing access to safe and healthy spaces for ALL children, youth, and those who educate them**, especially for students from communities that have been marginalized and are often disproportionately impacted by environmental inequities. *Examples elevating the importance of sustainability and climate resiliency for K-12 schools include but are not limited to:*

- The **U.S. Department of Education** released its [Climate Adaptation Plan](#) (2021), establishing that climate change is a present and grave threat, naming a climate leader in the department, and committing to internal action at the department as well as for those that receive federal funding.
- The **Aspen Institute's K12 Climate Action Commission** released an [Action Plan](#) (2021) that focuses on advancing equity through climate action, and calls for every school district to develop and implement a climate action plan in the next five years.
- The **State of California** has a number of [mandates, policies, expectations and guidelines for California schools](#) to integrate environmental literacy, environmental sustainability, and climate resilient practices into facilities and operations as well as curriculum and instruction.

The above examples are important and necessary but implementation is far from sufficient. Leading public-school systems toward these environmental literacy outcomes is challenging and takes a significant amount of support from local leaders. **To achieve sustainable and climate-ready action in K-12 schools, it is necessary to provide the appropriate staffing at the state, regional, and local level to support districts and schools.** In California, county offices of education (COEs) are critical for advancing this regional progress, as they can provide backbone support to a region, catalyzing change and doing so in a way that keeps equity at the core of the approach.

II. HOW IS THE CA EDUCATION SYSTEM ORGANIZED, AND WHAT ROLE DOES A COE PLAY WITHIN THIS STRUCTURE?

The California K-12 Education System has a number of nested entities that work together to serve over 6.2 million public school students.¹

- **California State Board of Education:** The governing and policy-making body of the California Department of Education sets K-12 education policy in the areas of standards, instructional materials, assessment, and accountability.
- **California Department of Education:** An agency within the Government of California that oversees public education. The department oversees funding and testing, and holds local educational agencies accountable for student achievement.
- **County Offices of Education (COEs):** California has **58 COEs** (these are further organized into 11 regions through the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association ([CCSESA](#)) - see image to the right for a map of these regions). They provide the following services to schools within their county: support and monitor local education agencies (LEAs), provide instruction to special populations who need unique support, offer instructional and technical support, develop the education workforce, and lead high-impact county-wide initiatives.
- **School Districts:** California has just over **1,000 school districts**. They are governed by their local school board and operate as independent jurisdictions. Within these 1,000 school districts there is a large diversity of size and location:
 - Large urban/suburban school districts contain a significant portion of CA students - *25 school districts in CA have 30% of the student population (see list [here](#))* - these large districts are concentrated within the territory of only 12 COEs.
 - 40 COEs serve regions with less than 130 schools within that region. These are typically spread out across medium-sized school districts in suburban/urban areas, or small/very small school districts (60% of all districts in CA).
- **Schools:** In California there are just over **10,500 public schools** and over 3,200 private Schools², with private school enrollment making up about 7-9% of student enrollment in California.³
- **Teachers:** Over **300,000 teachers** work in California public schools, with at least another 90,000 in California private schools.



¹ CDE Fingertip Facts on California Public Education: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp>

² [Private School Review Facts](#)

³ CDE Private School Facts: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ps/cefprivinstr.asp>

III. WHY ARE COEs A GOOD LEVERAGE POINT FOR CHANGE FOR SUSTAINABLE AND CLIMATE READY SCHOOLS?

In California, County Offices of Education (COEs) have emerged as a critical leverage point for advancing regional progress towards environmental literacy, sustainability, and climate ready schools initiatives. While school districts, schools, and teachers, are all critical units of change for integrating sustainable and climate resilient principles and practices into schools; **COEs provide a unique and powerful leverage point for facilitating widespread change across their region.**

By definition, COEs are the natural intermediary between the state and local education agencies (districts), as their role is to support and monitor local education agencies (LEAs), provide instruction to special populations who need unique support, offer instructional and technical support, develop the education workforce, and lead high-impact county-wide initiatives. Environmental literacy and sustainability initiatives, and/or Climate Ready schools initiatives, are good examples of “high-impact initiatives” that can catalyze change across a region. **Such initiatives provide a vision for what it means to have a “sustainable and climate ready school,” as well as provide the necessary “backbone support,” such as expertise, resources, and technical assistance, and do so in a way that is centered in equity.**

This idea of COE’s as backbone support for sustainability and environmental literacy is also a compelling model in California due to the critical supportive role that COEs already play in providing expertise, resources, and technical assistance for small to medium-sized school districts across the state. [Emerging research](#) across the U.S. shows that investments in a Sustainability Coordinator (and/or Environmental Literacy Specialist) are often correlated with size of school district (i.e. # of schools) - the larger the school district, the more likely they are to have a sustainability coordinator.⁴ Because the majority of school districts across California are small-to-medium sized, they are unlikely to have the resources to invest in a full-time sustainability coordinator or environmental literacy specialist. COEs are naturally positioned to play a pivotal role in advancing this work throughout their regions by investing in staff support for the region with equity and inclusion at the core. Other high-impact initiatives led at the county-level (i.e. STEAM, Makers Spaces, Mental Health, etc.) have proven the value and importance of these types of initiatives, contributed to capacity building within local schools, and paved the way for districts to integrate this work more deeply through dedicated staff and resources. The same now needs to happen for environmental literacy and sustainability.

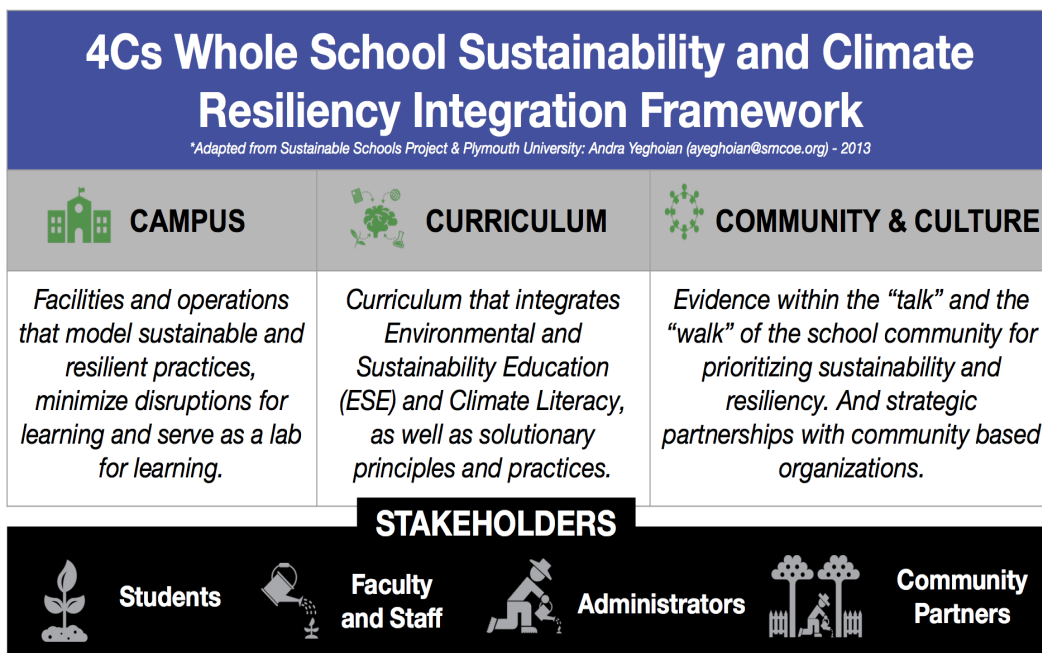
Another advantage of support at the county-level, is that COEs also serve as an intermediary between other governmental and non-governmental (NGO) agencies that provide schools with programs and resources.⁵ Therefore, COEs are well-positioned to form cross-sector partnerships that efficiently coordinate and deploy targeted resources for environmental literacy (i.e. field trips, guest speakers, etc.) as well as technical assistance and funding for sustainable and climate ready practices in facilities and operations. Similar to other initiatives, COEs will be able to distribute these resources and services with a focus on equity to protect those disproportionately impacted by environmental injustices and climate impacts.

⁴ [Global and Local F\(actors\) in Environmental and Sustainability Education Policies](#)

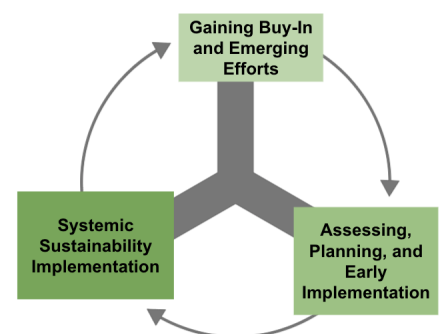
⁵ Learning Policy Institute: [Leverage Resources - Community Schools and Technical Assistance](#)

IV. WHAT DOES AN ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY AND SUSTAINABILITY/CLIMATE READY INITIATIVE LOOK LIKE AT A COE? AND WHAT KIND OF STAFF IS NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS?

An Environmental Literacy, Sustainability Initiative, and/or Climate Ready Schools Initiative in a COE can provide many different levels of support to its region’s districts and schools, including: **capacity building** for different stakeholder groups (administrators, teachers, students, etc.), **networking** sustainability and climate leaders across schools and districts, networking school communities to community based partners and technical assistance resources, and providing ongoing **technical assistance services**. By its very nature, this type of initiative is about wide-spread change across a “whole school”, (or “whole-district”) as it aims to bring environmental sustainability and climate ready efforts across all facets of an institution, the **campus, curriculum, community and culture**. *To learn more about this whole school approach visit: [Whole-School Sustainable and Climate Resilient Schools Framework](#).*



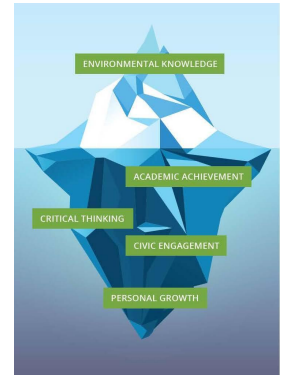
While there are many viable change management theories⁶ that could be applied to bringing an initiative of this nature to an organization, COEs currently leading this work in California have observed the **stages of change** for building an initiative centered around environmental literacy and sustainability generally follow a similar pattern both at the COE and in the districts and schools they aim to support: **(1) gaining buy-in and emerging efforts; (2) assessing, planning, and early implementation; and (3) systemic, sustainable implementation**. While each of these phases serve their own purpose for managing change, initiatives can often be fluid across phases. For example, many COEs that have long-standing residential or day-time outdoor education programs



⁶ Explore more change theories in this WebQuest: [Change Theories for Solutionaries](#)

can use this sustained success to generate buy-in for a broader environmental literacy initiative. Additionally, emerging efforts at the early implementation stage, such as a zero waste campaign, carbon neutral energy plans, or the integration of environmental literacy into subject area instruction, can reinforce buy-in and help move the overall change process forward.

A critical part of a successful sustainable and climate ready schools initiative is to reinforce the role that environmental literacy and sustainability play in providing equitable access to healthy learning environments and high-quality learning experiences. **Research shows time and time again that resource allocation for environmental education leads to the social-emotional and academic student learning outcomes at the heart of California's equity-focused local control and continuous improvement systems, and can help districts meet multiple goals at once for their most vulnerable students.**⁷



One key to success for COE initiatives is their investment in a position that can help manage this change process by fostering engagement from the grassroots level, as well as support from the top, running programs and services, and evaluating and communicating impact along the way. **A number of COEs have begun to set the precedent that hiring Environmental Literacy/Sustainability Coordinators**, and/or supporting a certain % FTE of an already existing coordinator or director level position to focus on sustainability, leads to successful initiative outcomes.

This mirrors the growing trend in other sectors such as business and industry where Chief Sustainability Officers have become commonplace⁸, or higher education, which has seen a growing expansion of Offices of Sustainability that provide support for sustainability initiatives across the university. These staffing models include roles such as [Chief Sustainability Officers](#), Sustainability Directors and Coordinators, Sustainability Project Managers, and Climate Corps Fellows.

Another parallel example for what this can look like over time for staff is the technology transition, which has unfolded over many decades with infrastructure investments such as hardware, software, internet connectivity, and staffing information technology (IT) departments. These departments are staffed with roles such as Chief Information Officers, all the way down to direct support and analytical IT roles such as help desk, technicians, and analysts. However, unlike the technology transition, which happened over decades, **the climate crisis demands immediate action to protect the present and future health and wellbeing of humanity.**

Within a county region, coordinators are responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of an environmental literacy (and/or sustainable and climate ready schools) initiative and associated programs and services.

Counties that have launched such efforts have also seen that these coordinators and directors work closely with other departments and divisions, for example: curriculum content coordinators, outdoor education, business and facilities, student services, and court and community school programs. Additional examples of staff who might directly support an initiative of this nature include: Climate Corps

⁷ [EEWorks](#): A research partnership between NAAEE, Stanford, and NAAEE, Stanford University, the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. EPA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other respected organizations to demonstrate the impact of high quality environmental education

⁸ Chief Sustainability Officers in the C-Suite: [NPR's MarketPlace - April 2021](#) and [Reuters - April 2011](#)

Fellows⁹, Green Facilities and Operations Analysts, Community Base Partner Coordinators, etc. Similar to initiatives that work across multiple divisions (i.e. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; or MTSS) environmental and climate related initiatives touch on all aspects of school life; and therefore, requires an all hands-on deck approach. By working across divisions, environmental literacy and sustainability coordinators build capacity of their colleagues for taking ownership over the work, identify additional entry points for stakeholders within their school communities, and deepen their impact more efficiently and effectively.

Example mission, vision, and goals from Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiatives at two different COEs can be found below:

1) San Mateo COE Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiative's Vision, Mission, and Goals:

- VISION: K-12 school communities are models of sustainability and climate resiliency, and equip students with the tools, resources, and life experiences to create an environmentally sustainable, socially just, and economically thriving world.
- MISSION: The Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiative (ELSI) provides "backbone support" to San Mateo County Schools in prioritizing environmental literacy and integrating environmental sustainability and climate-resilient practices across a school's campus, curriculum, community, and culture.
- STRATEGIC GOALS: 1) Every district has a baseline assessment of sustainability and climate-ready efforts, and has developed and begun implementing a strategic plan for whole school sustainability and climate-ready schools integration. 2) Every student graduates environmentally literate in a number of different focus areas (i.e. energy, water, waste, ecosystems, etc.) that are relevant to sustainability and climate resiliency.

2) San Diego COE Environmental Literacy Initiative Goals:

- Support a collaborative network of San Diego EE programs designed to increase access to and use of EE programs in San Diego schools.
- Identify and share best practices for integrating environmental literacy into classroom instruction K-12.
- Collaborate with C&I coordinators to design and implement professional learning for state content standards and frameworks using an environmental lens as well as best pedagogy for teaching outdoors.
- Connect IHE experts to classroom educators to build educator understanding of local environmental phenomena and research as well as develop instructional resources to support environmental literacy in the K-12 classroom.

Example job descriptions for COE sustainability coordinators can be found here:

- [SMCOE Regional Staffing Model for Environmental Literacy Initiative](#)
- [Sample COE and Sustainability Coordinator Job Descriptions](#)

⁹ Different Climate Corps Fellow Programs: [California Climate Action Corps](#) and [SEI Climate Corps](#)

V. WHAT IS THE INVESTMENT REQUIRED TO HAVE A COE ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVE AND COORDINATOR?

The investment for a COE Environmental Literacy (and/or Sustainable and Climate Ready Schools) initiative will range based on the level of FTE commitment that can be dedicated to this work, as well as depth of programs and services being offered. For example, as an initiative expands beyond curriculum efforts to include campus facilities and operations, or community and culture efforts such as student engagement and sustainability committee support, the % FTE commitment, as well as the budget for running programs and services will increase. COEs who have made this investment already have used a mix of general funds and outside funds to support programs. In the table below, find example expenses, and to see details about what it looks like to staff this work in one region visit: [SMCOE Regional Staffing Model for Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiative](#).

Coordinator Salary and Benefits

Item	Details
Example Salary and Benefits for Coordinator	See sample expenses from two COE's below: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> San Mateo COE Coordinator Salary/Benefits Annual: \$203,000 San Diego COE Coordinator Salary/Benefits Daily \$187,250 (\$875/day x 214 days) Santa Cruz COE Coordinator Salary and Benefits Annual \$191,700
Total for a Coordinator at Every COE in CA	On average the cost of one coordinator at every COE would be about \$200,000 - \$250,000 for all 58 COEs in California . This would be an investment of \$13-\$15 million each year to have every COE have an environmental literacy and sustainability coordinator.

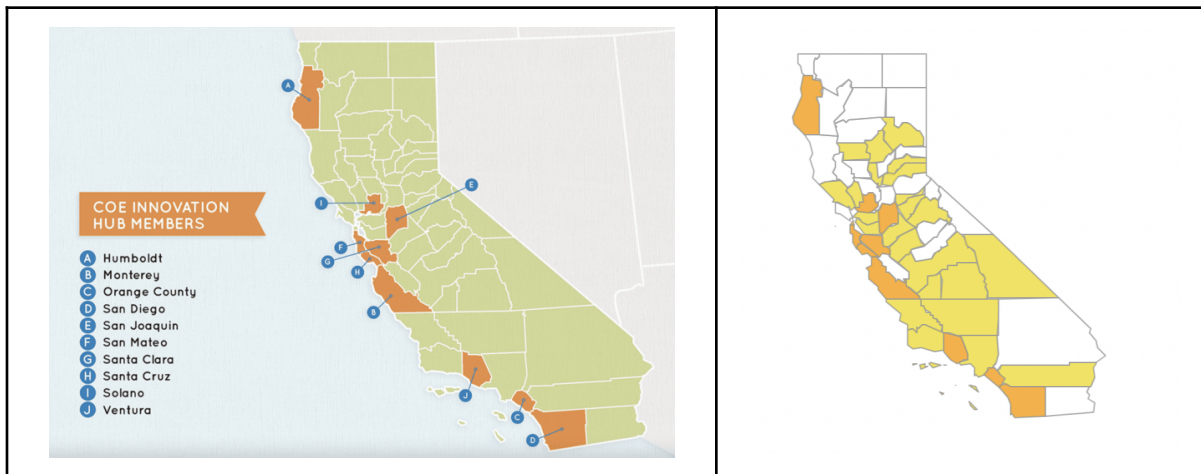
Sample Expenses: An additional operating budget of somewhere between \$250,000 - \$500,000 per each county office would help to run programs and networks, and build out support staff

Item	Details
Climate Corps Fellows	Climate Corps Fellows are a great resource for supporting early initiatives and ongoing projects and programs. The average costs of a climate corps fellow serving in a 10 month fellowship is \$25,000 - \$35,000 ; however, there are some programs that are free or at a much lower cost. <i>Two key programs serving California include:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SEI Climate Corps: https://www.climatecorps.org/fellow.html CA State Climate Corps: https://www.californiavolunteers.ca.gov/climateactioncorps/
Capacity Building Programs	Not including staff time for facilitation, the costs associated with capacity building programs include the following per participant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Materials and food: \$100 - \$200 Stipends/Substitutes: \$500 - \$2,000 Coaches and Support Staff: \$500 per participant Average costs for COEs running these programs are the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher Capacity Building: 100 teachers = \$150,000 - \$170,000 Administrative Capacity Building: 50 administrators = \$125,000 - \$140,000 Youth Program: 100 students = \$115,000 - \$130,000
Networks	Depending on the number of networks and frequency of meetings, this can range anywhere on average of \$5,000 - \$20,000
Special Projects	Projects might include start-up costs on things like websites, dashboards, green COE efforts, etc. Special projects usual average \$10,000 - \$20,000 per year

*Find a full-length budget example in SMCOE's Initiative Annual Report Examples: [2019-20](#) and [2020-21](#).

VI. WHICH CALIFORNIA COUNTY OFFICES OF EDUCATION (COE) HAVE MADE PROGRESS TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND/OR CLIMATE READY SCHOOLS EFFORTS?

Various COEs have launched initiatives related to environmental literacy, sustainability, or climate resiliency. Many of these COEs are part of the California Environmental Literacy Initiative's (CAELI) COE Innovation Hub (figure below on left). Each of these COEs is approaching their initiatives with a different theory of action that responds to their local context. These COEs come together in the CAELI COE Innovation Hub to exchange ideas, and work towards collective action goals that draw from best practices in each region.



There are also a number of COE's that have joined the state-wide Environmental Literacy COE Community of Practice (figure above on the right). The community of practice shares the tools and resources developed by the CAELI COE Innovation Hub, and seeks to expand access to environmental literacy, and sustainable and climate ready schools action in all COE regions. Some of the course outcomes for this CAELI COE State-wide Community of Practice (COP) are:

- Supporting access to regular ongoing environmental and outdoor learning experiences for students, by working with school districts, teachers, and community-based partners (CBPs). This work centers on supporting those from the most vulnerable and marginalized communities.
- Supporting districts to develop district-wide plans that include experiences for students at all grade levels, with an emphasis on low-income students and students of color.
- Providing technical assistance to districts in Implementing a whole school sustainability framework through the integration of environmental literacy and sustainability into the curriculum, campus, community, and culture.
- Infusing sustainability principles and practices into COE core operations.

For more specific details about the progress of this work at each COE, visit the [CA COE Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiative Progress and Lead Staff](#) spreadsheet. This provides details about the number of districts and schools served within a county, as well as progress made towards regional backbone support for efforts within facilities, curriculum, and community and culture.

VII. WHAT CAN EDUCATIONAL LEADERS, DECISION MAKERS, AND FUNDERS DO TO HELP FURTHER THE SYSTEMIC INTEGRATION OF THIS WORK IN THE K-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM?

In order to see environmental literacy and sustainability become systemically integrated into the K-12 system, investments need to be made at both the state and local level. Recommendations for moving this work forward in the first half of the decade of action include:

- **COEs:** Invest in an environmental literacy and sustainability coordinator who can lead a comprehensive environmental literacy, sustainability, and climate ready schools initiative.
- **State Department of Education:** Invest in a sustainability office at the Department of Education and staff a position that can help to coordinate the efforts of County Offices of Education (COEs) that are serving as regional backbone support for local school districts.
- **Policy Makers and Funders:** California state policy leaders should ensure district and school access to support for environmental literacy, sustainability, and climate ready schools efforts by allocating funding to explicitly support implementation of initiatives at every County Office of Education. Additional funding for programs and services can come from local funding sources such as utility agencies, municipal and county agencies, business and industry, and philanthropy.

→ *To see an example of what it looks like to staff this initiative and sample job descriptions: [SMCOE Regional Staffing Model for Environmental Literacy and Sustainability/Climate Ready Initiative](#).*