



EJ Freedom School Zine

LEARN

Water and Air Quality
Local Sustainability

EXPLORE

Wild Mile
Altgeld Gardens
Green Schools
Black Oaks Farm

ACTIVATE

Climate Action Plans
Regional Trip

MOMENTS

Bird Banding at Big Marsh
Press Conference
City Hall

2025-2026



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EJ Freedom School Zine



Altgeld Gardens Library, EJFS 2025

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The Vision

Cultivating a generation of informed and empowered youth who are capable of addressing environmental issues through engagement and problem-solving encompasses the general vision of this summer immersive program. Through education, collaboration, and climate action, the Environmental Justice Freedom School summer program helps students turn environmental challenges into opportunities for justice, resilience, and sustainable change for the Chicago neighborhoods and school campus students represent.

The Mission

Our mission is to equip Chicago Public School students with knowledge, skills, networking, and speaking opportunities in formal spaces of various Chicago stakeholders to advance environmental advocacy, justice, and climate action in their school communities. Through immersive, hands-on learning, networking, field experience, and collaborative activities, this summer program provides students with the opportunity to explore environmental problems and solutions, meet local leaders and community advocates who are advancing Chicago's climate and environmental work, and construct a climate action plan for their school. By fostering critical thinking, community networking, and civic engagement, the purpose is to inspire students to become lifelong advocates for a just, healthier, and sustainable future.

Partners of the Environmental Justice Freedom School

For the past four years, the Environmental Justice Freedom School (EJFS) brought together young leaders from across Chicago to explore what environmental and climate justice looks like in their own communities. Through hands-on field trips, creative projects, and powerful conversations, students connected the dots between environmental health, social equity, and community action. From making seed bombs on the Wild Mile to testing air quality at Big Marsh Park, they learned that climate justice is local and global, rooted in everyday choices and collective care. Here is a snapshot of those experiences from June 2025 and June 2026.



**SOUTHEAST
ENVIRONMENTAL
TASK FORCE**



**PEOPLE FOR
COMMUNITY
RECOVERY**



**Chicago
Ornithological
Society**



**URBAN
RIVERS**



BLACKOAKS
Center for Sustainable
Renewable Living

Welcome to the Environmental Justice Freedom School

By Jackson Potter, Chicago Teachers Union Vice President, EJFS Co-Founder
excerpts from 2025 exit interview

The Environmental Justice Freedom School provides programming for young people that keeps them safe, engaged, where they can learn things and put some money in their pocket at the same time, with educators who also want to learn about environmental justice. The EJ Freedom School was initially developed to provide young people work in the summer weeks in the gap after school ended and before Park District or Summer Chicago jobs started.

School communities are impacted by the cumulative impacts of pollution, toxins, and industrial contamination, and how that has played out in terms of greater harm for Black and brown communities in low-income areas. We consider this program as a way, in the best traditions of the Civil Rights Movement, to help young people and teachers together, and then create some action plans that connect to what they've learned.

I learned early on that when we talk abstractly about green schools and clean air and solar panels, people don't really get it. It seems abstract and doesn't connect with their everyday lives, their struggles to make ends meet, pay the rent, and provide for their families.

But when you start talking about lead paint and lead pipes and how that harms human health, and how Black and brown children, as a result, can get learning disabilities and be impacted in terms of brain function and lifelong opportunities, that's different. When you talk about asbestos and mold causing asthma and other chronic conditions, when you think about polluted air in neighborhoods and lowering the quality of life, it becomes a top priority.

We know clean drinking water, clean air, and having schools that are healthy, that contribute to communities that have for historic reasons not been given those same opportunities and resources, are really important.



Big Marsh Park



The EJ Freedom School is in the communities that have been harmed the most by racism, divestment, school closures, and the closure of health clinics. These are the same communities in Black and brown, low-income areas that have seen the greatest contamination, where big corporations have polluted, where health is impacted at higher levels.

When you go to Englewood, there is a 20-year lower life expectancy than in Lincoln Park, in the same city just a few miles apart. We know that policies that cut food for children, undermine Medicaid, and eliminate programming for community schools and English language learners would have devastating consequences. We have already seen the disparities created by the existing system and its inability to provide in an equitable way.

The EJ Freedom School is designed to have young people and educators get the tools at their disposal to demand what is just, what they have not gotten, and what they need to continue to receive. Environmental justice Freedom School matters because all young people, all their school communities, and all their families and neighbors deserve better.

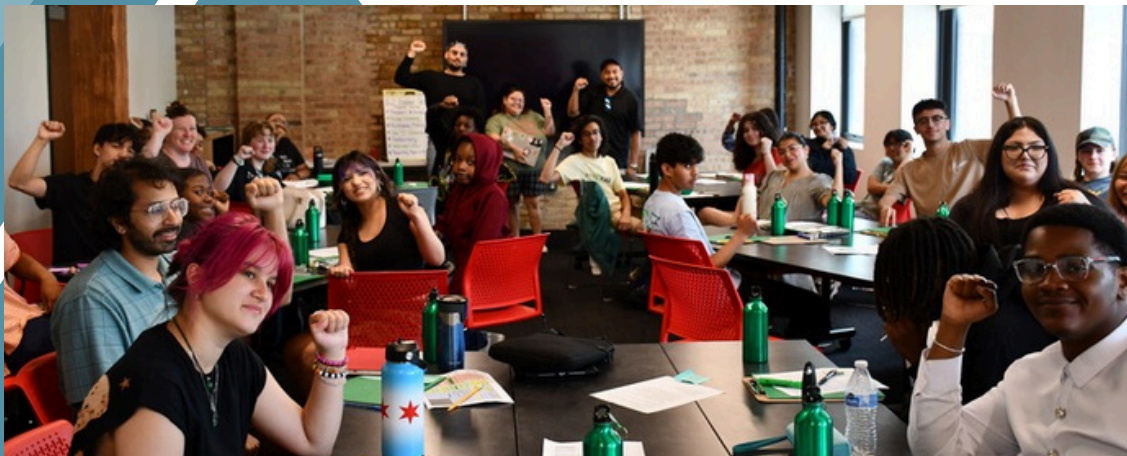
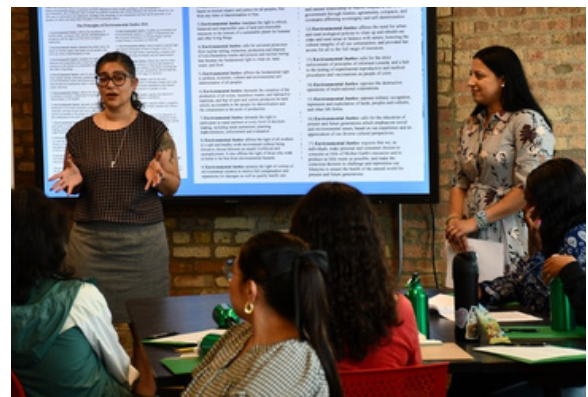


Building the Foundation

On the first day of the EJ Freedom School, students explored what the term “Freedom School” really means, past and present. Through open conversation, they reflected on education as a tool for liberation, community power, and collective care. Students were introduced to core Environmental Justice (EJ) principles, learning how race, class, health, and the environment are deeply connected. They learned directly from environmentalists who work in agencies to protect the use of air, water and land.

The Environmental Justice Freedom School partnered with the Southeast Side Environmental Task Force to teach students how to use asset mapping as a tool for understanding their communities and shaping meaningful School Climate Action Plans.

Through the workshop, students identified the people, organizations, community spaces, natural resources, and local strengths that can support environmental action. Asset mapping encouraged students to look beyond challenges and recognize the knowledge, relationships, and resources already present in their communities.



Environmental Justice Freedom School

BLACK OAKS CENTER

for Sustainable and Renewable Living, OFFICIAL PARTNER



The Environmental Justice Freedom School 2026 visited the Black Oaks Center for Sustainable and Renewable Living ecocampus to explore the powerful connection between renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and environmental innovation.

Students learned about agrivoltaics, the integration of food production and solar energy generation, and took part in establishing mushroom cultivation beneath four 60-foot-long solar arrays in the farm. Working alongside community partners, students helped prepare wood chip beds that will support mushroom production while demonstrating how land can be used to generate clean energy and grow food at the same time.

This hands-on experience showed students how creative, sustainable solutions can address climate change, strengthen local food systems, and make the most of available land. By learning directly in the field, EJ Freedom School students are gaining the knowledge and skills to envision a more resilient and equitable future.



Environmental Justice Freedom School

URBAN RIVERS

OFFICIAL PARTNER



The EJ Freedom School partnered with Urban Rivers to explore Chicago's Wild Mile, an innovative floating eco-park along the North Branch Canal. Through hands-on activities like seed bomb making, litter clean-ups, and ecosystem exploration, students experienced firsthand how environmental inequities shape urban spaces. They learned that climate justice isn't just a global issue, it starts in our own neighborhoods. By the end of their Wild Mile journeys, students left inspired with a deeper sense of stewardship, resilience, and the power of collective action to create lasting change in their communities.

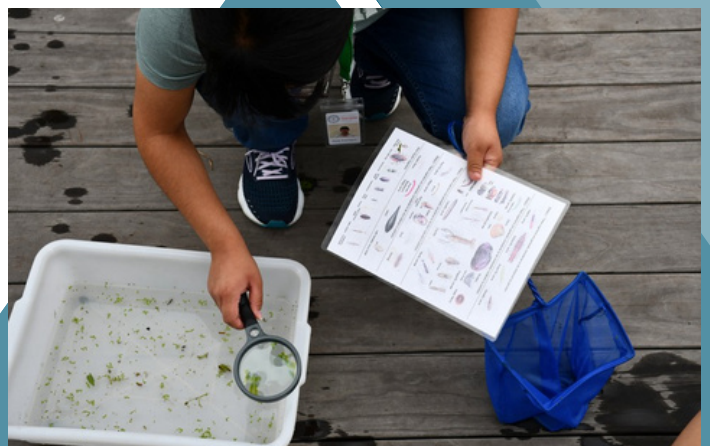
"Partnering with the EJ Freedom School at the Wild Mile gave students a chance to connect with climate justice in a hands-on way. Through activities that built both curiosity and stewardship, we saw how meaningful experiences in nature can inspire the next generation of environmental leaders."
—Urban Rivers





Wild Mile on the North Branch of the Chicago River, 2025

Urban Rivers partnering on the Wild Mile field trips allowed us to engage with the EJ Freedom School students in hands-on activities that connected climate justice to their daily lives. Seeing their curiosity grow through these activities affirmed the importance of creating accessible opportunities for youth to experience environmental stewardship. We are grateful for the partnership and proud to help inspire the next generation of environmental leaders.



PEOPLE FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY

OFFICIAL PARTNER



**PEOPLE FOR
COMMUNITY
RECOVERY**



Altgeld Gardens: Learning from the Roots of Environmental Justice

The EJ Freedom School students visited Altgeld Gardens, a community known as the birthplace of the environmental justice movement in Chicago. There, they met Cheryl Johnson, daughter of Hazel M. Johnson, the “Mother of Environmental Justice.” Cheryl shared her mother’s powerful legacy and spoke about how community organizing, love, and persistence turned lived experience into a national movement for clean air, water, and dignity.

Afterward, students joined a toxic tour led by People for Community Recovery, walking through the neighborhood to see firsthand how pollution sources surround families’ homes, schools, and parks. They learned how dirty air and unsafe water impact daily life, and how residents continue to fight for accountability and environmental justice. The visit grounded students in the truth that climate justice is about people, place, and power, and that change begins by listening to communities most impacted.



“

The most impactful moment and activity was realizing how housing is deeply connected to environmental justice because where people live often determines their access to clean air, safe water, and a healthy environment. **This was the tour of Altgeld Gardens.** This illustrated how communities with “affordable housing” are often located near highways, industrial sites, or areas with poor infrastructure, which exposes residents—especially low-income families and communities of color—to higher levels of pollution and health risks due to the proximity to the pollution. At the same time, these neighborhoods often lack access to green spaces, grocery stores with fresh food, or reliable public transportation.

Environmental justice goes hand in hand with housing justice by addressing these inequities by ensuring that safe, affordable homes are built and maintained in areas free from environmental hazards, and that existing neighborhoods are invested in rather than neglected. It’s about recognizing that the right to housing is also the right to live in conditions that support health, safety, and well-being. When we talk about housing justice, we are also talking about environmental justice—because the environment is not just forests and rivers, but the air we breathe, the soil beneath our homes, and the communities where families grow and thrive.

– Rasha F., EJFS 2025 Teacher

FRIENDS OF BIG MARSH

OFFICIAL PARTNER

Biking for Justice at Big Marsh Park in 2025

At Big Marsh Park, the EJ Freedom School students traded city streets for open trails, exploring one of Chicago's largest urban nature reserves in the far southeast side of Chicago by bike. Surrounded by wetlands, wildflowers, and migrating birds, students experienced how reclaimed industrial land can transform into a thriving ecosystem. As they pedaled through the park, they reflected on how environmental restoration and community resilience go hand in hand. Each ride became a lesson in movement, balance, and connection, reminding the students that healing the our communities starts right where we live.



Tracking the Air We Breathe



At Big Marsh Park, EJ Freedom School students became community scientists by learning how to collect air quality data using the Airbeam3 monitor. This handheld device measures tiny particles in the air (PM_{2.5}) that can affect our health and environment. As students walked the trails of Big Marsh Park, they saw how pollution levels change across different areas and discussed how air quality connects to environmental justice, who breathes cleaner air, and who doesn't. By collecting real data, they learned that science is a tool for justice, and their voices can help push for cleaner, healthier neighborhoods for everyone.



"It is extremely hopeful to witness these young leaders engage with the environment around them in this way. They know what kind of world they want to live in and they are learning the tools to help them make it."

-Friends of Big Marsh



“

My favorite memory from EJ Freedom School was the camping trip! Although we didn't get to stay overnight, it was a very fun and exciting day! It was also my first time trying out smores and I enjoyed them. - Arahany

”



LEARNING AT BIG MARSH

The Pause That Changes Everything!

The EJ Freedom School students stepped into nature at Big Marsh Park for a powerful Forest Therapy experience. Surrounded by the sights and sounds of Chicago's wild side, students slowed down, tuned in, and reconnected—with nature and themselves. Through guided reflection, mindful walking, and deep listening, they discovered how pausing in nature can restore focus, balance, and perspective. These gentle, immersive journeys nurture emotional wellness, resilience, and a sense of belonging—reminding each student that caring for the Earth begins with caring for our own inner landscape.



Steelworkers Park

In 2026, the Environmental Justice Freedom School visited Steelworkers Park to explore the history of Chicago's industrial landscape and learn how communities can reimagine and reclaim former industrial spaces.

Students learned about the slag left behind by the region's steel mills and how these industrial materials helped shape the landscape of the Southeast Side. They also explored the ways the site has been transformed into a public space for recreation, environmental learning, and community connection.



CHICAGO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

OFFICIAL PARTNER



Birding for Biodiversity at Montrose Harbor, EJFS 2025

The EJ Freedom School students went birding with the Chicago Ornithological Society (COS) at the Montrose Harbor Bird Sanctuary, a vital stopover for migratory birds traveling along the Mississippi Flyway. As they spotted warblers, sparrows, and other rare species, students learned why Chicago's lakefront habitats are essential for birds to rest, refuel, and survive long journeys.

Edward Warden of COS shared how habitat loss, light pollution, and climate change threaten migratory birds, and how people can make a positive difference. From protecting green spaces to turning off lights during migration season, students saw that human choices matter. The experience highlighted how caring for wildlife is part of environmental justice, and how protecting biodiversity helps sustain healthy ecosystems for generations to come.





Bird Banding at Big Marsh, EJFS 2026

The Environmental Justice Freedom School 2026 joined the Chicago Ornithological Society at Big Marsh Park for an engaging bird banding demonstration that brought conservation science to life.

As Chicago Ornithological Society researchers conducted real-time data collection, students observed the careful process of safely capturing, identifying, measuring, and banding birds. They learned how this information helps scientists track bird populations, study migration patterns, and better understand the health of local ecosystems.

Through this hands-on experience, students saw how scientific research and environmental stewardship work together to protect wildlife and preserve the habitats that birds depend on. Big Marsh Park became an outdoor classroom where students connected with nature, explored conservation science, and gained a deeper appreciation for Chicago's role along important migratory routes.



Environmental Justice Freedom School

MAKING AN IMPACT



By Ayesha Qazi- Lampert, EJFS Co-Founder

It is powerful for young people to develop the skills they need to push the policies that shape our society and shape our world. A climate-resilient world involves everyone. It is intergenerational, active, and participatory, and it involves engaging in immersive experiences that a lot of our traditional schooling does not allow us to do because we do not have the resources or time. This Freedom School program is an enrichment experience for all of us to engage with our local partners one on one and develop the skill set and tool set to push the policies that shape our day-to-day working, learning, and teaching.

A specific need in this program is to develop relationships with our community partners. Our community partners across Chicago are doing beautiful and important work to protect the health of our environment and our people. It is about having direct interactions, asking questions to school facility managers, being out on the Wild Mile, and seeing the differences in resources from the North Side versus the South Side or the West Side. Students develop that skill set and then practice being at decision-making tables such as the Board of Education, engaging in pressure, speaking on the issues they are passionate about, and telling decision-makers what they want to see as primary stakeholders of the school system.

It brings me joy to see young people out in front of cameras, in front of the Board of Education, using multidisciplinary approaches. When they create signs and speak out, I want them to feel that they have a voice. What drives me is seeing young people realize that they can make a difference both individually and collectively. When they ask questions directly to people in power and shift policies, they did that. We did that. That is powerful and motivating, and it is what will help move our society forward.

We understand that climate change is impacting our day-to-day working, learning, and teaching conditions. It is leading to more extreme weather, creating both economic and social impacts, and people are struggling with resources and responses. By engaging in this program, we are providing tools not only for young people but also for teachers and districts to actively respond to these crises together.

Illinois and the Chicagoland area are home to Hazel Johnson, the mother of the environmental justice movement. Her daughter Cheryl Johnson continues that work through People for Community Recovery. It is important to support and carry that legacy forward and ensure that young people continue and build on it.



Environmental justice is a broad term with many principles, including intergenerational collaboration. This program reflects that by bringing together young people, teachers, educators, union leaders, and community members to craft narratives and tell their stories while shaping the future. It is important that students engage with literature of the past and present, including the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice developed by leaders of color, to understand the legacy they are building on.

Freedom Schools of the past engaged communities in assessing what they had, what they lacked, and what they needed. We are doing the same by having young people assess their communities, identify assets, and advocate for what is needed. This work equips them to address climate change and respond to crises, ensuring that all young people, especially those in Black and brown communities, have the tools to advocate for clean, safe, and modernized facilities.

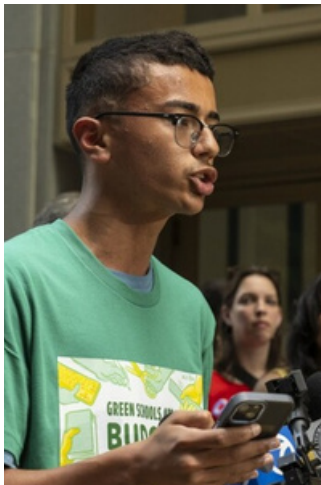
Many young people are anxious about their future. They want to live in a world that is safe, healthy, and clean. This program provides a space for them to voice those concerns and take action. It is one thing to learn and present, but it is another to be in spaces where change happens. It is important for policymakers and leaders to engage with youth, listen to them, and include them at the table so they can lead.

For any educator or young person who wants to start a similar program, begin by finding someone who supports this work. Start communicating, networking, and reaching out. If you care about this work, you can do it. There is someone in your community to connect with, and we are here to support and mentor so that every school has the opportunity to create a Freedom School.

In The News

CPS School Board establishes green schools pilot program

A resolution approved Thursday directs the school district to look for energy efficient ways to make needed repairs. The board unanimously approved the proposal.



Students from the EJ Freedom School 2025 played a key role in urging the Chicago School Board to adopt the green and healthy schools measure.

Enoc, a sophomore at George Washington High School, told the board that inequities in school funding leave students in less affluent, nonwhite neighborhoods with deteriorating buildings. “It doesn’t feel fair. It feels like we’re being punished because of where we live or the color of our skin,” he said, underscoring the need for cleaner, safer school facilities.

Ashley, a rising senior at Lincoln Park High School, emphasized that the initiative goes beyond energy savings. “It’s not just solar panels ... but to reinvest those savings into children’s health so no kid has to worry about asbestos,” she said. Together, the students highlighted how the resolution is part of a broader push for environmental justice and healthier learning environments across Chicago’s schools.



EJ Regional Trip

EJ Freedom School Students Take Climate Action to the State Capitol

EJ Freedom School students traveled to Springfield, Illinois, on October 29, 2025, to present their climate action plans directly to state leaders. Representing schools across the city, Miguel (Noble Muchin), Karla (Lane Tech), and Zion (Curie High School) met with House Speaker Chris Welch to share youth-driven solutions for building a greener, healthier, and more equitable Illinois.

During their visit, students highlighted community rooted ideas from expanding clean energy in schools to improving air quality and investing in environmental justice neighborhoods. Their conversations with legislators showed the power of youth advocacy and affirmed the role of young people in shaping statewide climate policy. The trip marked another milestone in the EJ Freedom School's mission: training Chicago youth to speak truth to power and demand environmental justice for all.



CLIMATE ACTION PLAN

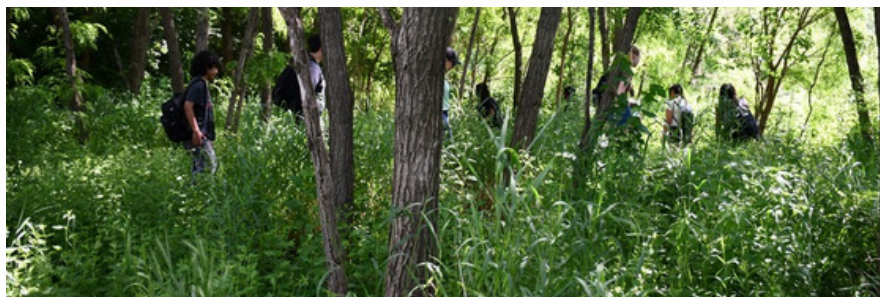


By Karla C. of Lane Tech High School

We are here on behalf of those whose voices need to be heard. And we are taking this opportunity of a lifetime to make sure we can do all that we can to better our future. We want to advocate for those who cannot speak up about their concerns, however, just because they cannot be heard does not mean that their opinions are not valid. We want to make sure that our opinions are heard, hence why I am speaking here today. Our vision is for Illinois to have clean air, actual safe water, and sustainable transportation.

In my community there is a large lack of trees due to the excessive amount of asphalt. Asphalt is harmful to humans. This has been mentioned in an article produced by Yale news titled “Asphalt adds to air pollution, especially on hot, sunny days”. It was mentioned in this article that asphalt emits chemicals that affect our air quality negatively and drastically. For example, fumes caused by the asphalt can have a negative impact on the lungs (Respiratory Symptoms and Lung Functional Impairments Associated with Occupational Exposure to Asphalt Fumes, National Library of Medicine) This can start to cause asthma or worsen it. A way we can help limit the amount of chemicals in the air we breathe is by planting more trees. Such a simple fix that can definitely change the tragic state of our air quality. Trees are able to absorb the toxic chemicals and filter out clean oxygen for us to be able breathe better air quality.

To preserve communities in need from the environmental effect we would need to diminish gas waste to meet the state and national goals. Safeguard solutions, map out accessibility and climate fairness.



Every child deserves the opportunity to have a safe and ecological option for transportation to and from school. If we had the option for free electric buses this would allow low-income families with a safe and environmentally friendly option.

There are not many high-ranking high schools near where I live, so it is an hour commute from my house to my school. If I had to walk to school that would take me 4 hours and 8 minutes. I rely on public transit, and I spend a good amount of my day commuting to and from school. I know how long the buses run for and the amount of damage they do to our environment, but I also need them in my daily life like so many of us here. So, we need electric buses for clean air. And affordable busing.

We want to secure affordable transportation costs to all students. Doing this will help both my family and my stress. I know this is not only a worry of mine but also for my friends and their family as well. This is very close to my heart, and I look forward to helping others understand how important this is to the community.



STUDENTS IN CTU ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FREEDOM SCHOOL TACKLE CLIMATE CONCERNS IN THEIR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY



By Erica Clark

At the end of the EJFS 2026, students presented their climate action plans to a group of CPS and city leaders, including Deputy Mayor of Education Khari Matthew Humphries, Deputy Mayor of Community Safety, Emanuel Andre, and members of the Chicago Public Schools Science education team.

Students at Solario High School believe improving their school will help improve their mostly Latine, working class Gage Park community. That's why Xitali Cruz and Julani Lopez proposed replacing the school's pool water heaters and, at the same time, installing solar panels to reduce electric bills.

At Percy Julian High School, sophomore Alonzo Collins tackled the problem of lead in the school's drinking fountains, which have levels far in excess of what is considered safe. "We should have access to clean drinking water just like the rest of Chicago," he said.

Students at George Washington High School presented a plan to install solar panels, which could save the school \$100,000 a year. The students want CPS to use those savings to fix the school's crumbling infrastructure—a part of a ceiling collapsed in a hallway a few years ago.



Environmental Justice Freedom School

CLIMATE ACTION PLANS



What's in the Air? 8 of 31

Creating a Healthier and More Sustainable School

The Issue: Many schools, especially older buildings, face problems with poor indoor air quality, facility hazards, and energy inefficiency. Students and staff spend 7-8 hours inside a school building.

This matters because it causes:

- Headaches and Fatigue
- Asthma and breathing problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Absence Increases
- Lower Academic Performance

Environmental justice means every community deserves equal protection from environmental hazards regardless of race, income, or neighborhood. Still, in reality, schools in Black, Latino, and low-income neighborhoods often face challenges. Which Communities of color are more likely to live near waste facilities, highways, and industrial zones? This means Juárez students breathe more polluted air before they even enter the building, and we get Less funding for repairs.



Washington student Kyren Gonzalez connected his school's problems to the larger issue of inequity in CPS. "Just because we're on the South East side, doesn't mean we don't deserve the same quality education as other schools," he said. "School is supposed to be a safe place, not a place that hurts students."

During a question and answer session with CPS and city officials, Englewood STEM student Derion Melton asked CPS officials a pointed question about those inequities: how does the district prioritize facilities funding to ensure that schools most in need of repairs get them?. Melton was unimpressed with the answer, but no worries. He feels the CTU program has given him the tools to advocate for what his school and community need. "This was an amazing experience and not just a school experience, but a life experience," he said. "It's gonna help me advocate on the issues I care about in my community."

CTU President Jackson Potter encouraged students to continue advocating and engaging in the political process. "Find out who your alderperson is. And continue building support, not just in your school but in the wider community because you need a broad base of support to win these fights," he said.

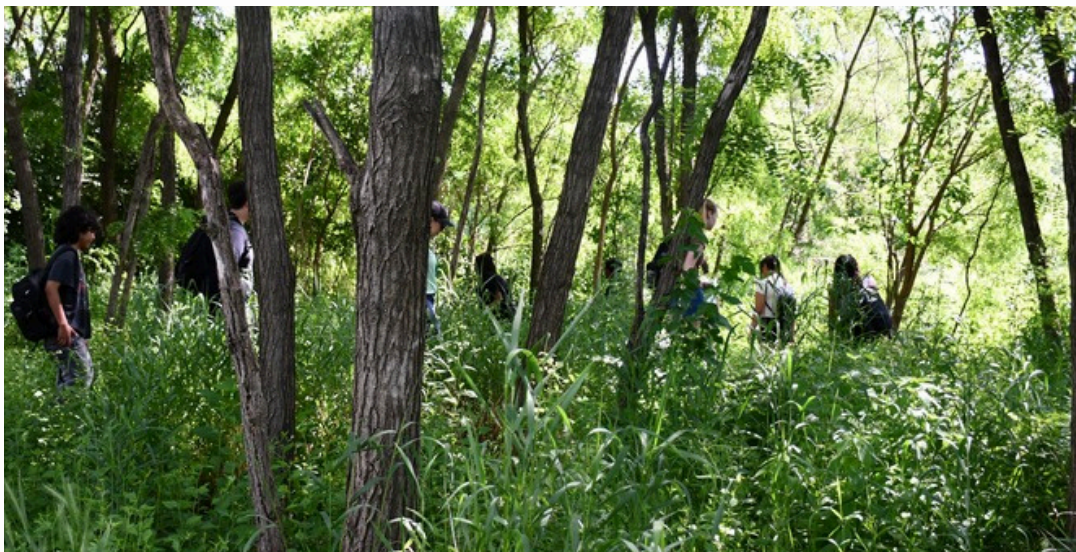


EJ REFLECTION



By Dr. Jayson Maurice-Porter, EJFS Co-Founder

Young people in Chicago want to learn more about the environment and climate, with a particular interest in justice. They've witnessed the world consume itself at its fastest rate in human history. Nearly half of the plastics our modern world has produced have been produced in their lifetimes (the 21st century). These students see climate agreements, once agreed upon, rescinded. Whereas Hurricane Katrina opened many people in my generations' eyes to climate crises, generations Z and Alpha were born with eyes wide open—literally predisposed to harm. Young people increasingly experience the climate emergencies they see on screen. In Chicago, students saw Tik Tok posts about forest fires in California one day, and then for weeks in June 2023 breathed in smog from fires in Canada. This is also true in their schools, where Chicago students are victims of everyday environmental injustices as consumers of toxic amounts of lead, asbestos, and other chemicals in and nearby their schools. It is no surprise that nearly a third of people between the ages of 16 and 25 are navigating climate anxiety and say that feelings and experiences related to climate change negatively impact their day. Their call for green schools is intimate and immediate.



In many ways, CTU's EJ Freedom School is a response to students' requests for a greener education, in form and function. Students know what they are consuming and want to know why and how to protect themselves. Students want greener schools. Students want greener education in the classroom. I just students don't get burned out. The environmental justice movement emerged because Black, brown, and working-class communities rejected how governments and industries forced them carrying the burden of the environmental policies that placed sewage waste treatment facilities and landfills in our communities. Similarly, today, young people are refusing to carry climate and environmental crises like the generations before them. If they're going to hold it, its going to be one their way. Thankfully, their way is more thoughtful. They are reasonably disappointed and frustrated, but their refusal reflects more power than disheartenment. They are ready, and we—older generations—owe it to them (and ourselves) to listen and learn from their perspectives now. Their experiences and thoughts are valid now.

I hope generations Z and Alpha know how valid their feelings are, and they see those feelings supported, because our fight for environmental and climate justice will be a long fight for them and future young generations. It's hard to tell a 15-year old that they might fight for something they'll never see. It's humbling and harrowing. I won't live to see the end of capitalism or white supremacy, and they might not either, but that doesn't mean that they our everyday fights don't matter. They matter more now then ever. They—our young students—matter more now than ever, too.



Carrying It Forward: The EJ Freedom School Journey

Throughout June 2025, the EJ Freedom School took students across Chicago to learn that environmental justice lives where we live. From biking the restored trails of Big Marsh Park to tracking air quality with Airbeam3, students saw how health, land, and community are deeply connected. At Altgeld Gardens, they learned from Cheryl Johnson and People for Community Recovery that the fight for clean air and water is rooted in history, courage, and community organizing.

On the Wild Mile with Urban Rivers, they restored ecosystems with their own hands, while Forest Therapy at Big Marsh offered space to pause, reflect, and reconnect. Birding at Montrose Harbor Bird Sanctuary with Chicago Ornithological Society reminded them that protecting biodiversity is essential to maintaining Chicago's unique habitats. Students witnessing agrivoltaics in action with Black Oaks was a breathtaking and grounding experience.

Through asset mapping with Southeast Side Environmental Task Force, public speaking, and creative expression, students transformed learning into leadership. They left the EJ Freedom School with confidence, connection, and a shared understanding that climate justice is both local and global, and that their voices, actions, and care for community truly matter. This is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a lifetime of stewardship, solidarity, and change.



Acknowledgments

Chicago Teachers Union Foundation

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Jen Johnson, CTU Foundation Executive Director

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Special thanks to our official Environmental Justice Freedom School partners for sharing their knowledge, opening their spaces, and inspiring students to become advocates for healthier, more sustainable communities.

Black Oaks Center for Sustainable and Renewable Living
Chicago Ornithological Society
Friends of Big Marsh
People for Community Recovery
Southeastside Environmental Task Force
Urban Rivers



Environmental Justice Freedom School Project Team

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EJ Freedom School Zine was produced by Michael Moriarty.

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