Litigation Can Bring About Social Change

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Litigation has always been an essential tool for solving social problems.

And the science behind this social problem is clear: We must transition to 100 percent renewable energy and virtually eliminate greenhouse emissions in just a few decades to avert horrific harm to the planet's most vulnerable people and our very web of life.

Even the failure of a legal claim in court can show just how much the law needs to change.

Groundbreaking legal action is, and will be, especially crucial in combating climate change. That's why lawsuits brought by young people to force more ambitious action are so important. A victory this month in one such case in Massachusetts shows that any one suit may end up being a paradigm-shifting success. Four teenagers from Boston and Wellesley, Mass., along with lawyers from the Conservation Law Foundation and the

Massachusetts Energy Consumer Alliance, asked the courts to rule that the state had not lived up to its own 2008 law requiring aggressive restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions.

Though lower courts ruled against them, this week, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students.

Some say many of these legal efforts are unlikely to succeed. I am far more optimistic. The fact that a legal theory tackles new problems in novel ways does not necessarily mean it is unlikely to prevail. And court decisions do not occur in a social vacuum.

Even climate law cases that don't succeed help drive solutions. Sometimes, the failure of a legal claim in court shows just how much the law needs to change. When enough people demand that change, it happens.

Youth participation — in courtrooms and beyond — is essential to climate solutions. And when it comes to climate litigation, we must get creative and sometimes take risks. The scale and urgency of the problem demand nothing less.