



By Linda K. Breggin

Literacy Initiatives Flourish in States

In October a state task force presented recommendations to address environmental literacy and increase opportunities for children to participate in outdoor experiences. In so doing, Delaware joined a multitude of states adopting literacy plans. These programs provide a framework for school systems to improve environmental education. The North American Association of Environmental Education explains that plans help ensure environmental content is consistent and accurate, integrated into formal education systems, and aligned with state education goals. Although definitions vary, Oregon, for example, defines environmental literacy as “an individual’s understanding, skills, and motivation to make responsible decisions that consider his or her relationships to natural systems, communities, and future generations.”

States have been at the forefront of environmental education for decades. They cite myriad reasons for their efforts, including the need to prepare a work force to address environmental challenges as well as increase children’s connection to nature and reduce obesity through outdoor activities. Their views mirror those of a National Science Foundation committee that in 2003 recognized: “In the coming decades, the public will be called upon more frequently to understand complex environmental issues.” The committee concluded that “creating a sci-

entifically informed citizenry requires a concerted, systematic approach to environmental education.”

Education also may contribute to environmental quality gains. A 2005 report for the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation found “compelling evidence that environmental education encourages measurable environmental stewardship.” Furthermore, the “higher the level of environmental knowledge the higher the degree of pro-environment behavior.” According to the report, even minimal pro-environmental efforts could save over \$75 billion per year through activities such as reduced domestic electricity use. The report, however, found that “public comprehension of more complex environmental subjects is very limited” and that the average American doesn’t understand basic concepts such as power generation.

The uptake in environmental literacy plans was sparked in part by the No Child Left Inside Coalition, whose members include businesses, educators, and environmental groups. The coalition contends that No Child Left Behind has reduced class time on science and other subjects related to environmental education. It seeks an amendment that would provide financial incentives to develop literacy plans.

In a now familiar story, the federal legislation is stalled in Congress. But states from Hawaii to Rhode Island have moved forward sans federal legislation. According to Traci Price, NAAEE’s advocacy committee co-chair, 13 states have developed plans, 9 have draft plans, and 17 have plans in development. In some states, such as Colorado and Oregon, state legislation mandates plan development. In others, such as Kansas and Missouri, plans were developed pursuant to executive orders. In addition, several states, such as Kentucky, have initiated their plans through governor-appointed task forces. And in some states literacy plans do not have the state’s imprimatur but are

developed through broad-based community efforts.

The content of state plans varies but NAAEE guidelines provide that plans should address, for example, programs for teacher professional development and measurement of student literacy. Notably, the No Child Left Inside Coalition maintains that in many cases environmental education can be incorporated into existing curriculums and does not require additional funding or reduce instruction in other areas. Furthermore, the NSF report concluded that using the environment as an integrating concept can increase student interest and achievement generally.

Although environmental literacy plans generally are not facing serious opposition at the state level, the Maryland mandate that students complete an environmental literacy program elicited controversy at the national level. In a *Washington Times* oped last year, Competitive Enterprise Institute Fellow Matthew Melchiorre exhorted

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parents to “let school officials and lawmakers know that they won’t stand for green zealots targeting their children for indoctrination.”

Similar concerns have been voiced about the No Child Left Inside legislation, which Dan Lips, a Heritage Foundation senior policy analyst, told CNSNews.com represented “the politicization of what’s taught in American classrooms.” But it is important to remember that environmental education wasn’t always a partisan issue. George H. W. Bush signed the National Environmental Education Act, stating in no uncertain terms that environmental education was needed “given the magnitude and nature of the environmental problems we face.”

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