



Environmental Education and the No Child Left Behind Act

Climate changes, depletion of natural resources, air and water problems, and other environmental challenges are pressing and complex issues that threaten human health, economic development, and national security. Finding wide-spread agreement about what specific steps we need to take to solve these problems is difficult. Environmental education will help ensure our nation's children have the knowledge and skills necessary to address these complex issues.

For more than three decades, environmental education has been a growing part of effective instruction in America's schools. Responding to the need to improve student achievement and prepare students for the 21st century economy, schools throughout the nation now offer some form of environmental education. Thirty million students and 1.2 million teachers annually are involved in programs ranging from environmental science courses to an interdisciplinary approach that uses the environment as an integrating theme throughout the entire curriculum. Yet, environmental education is facing a national crisis. Many schools are being forced to scale back or eliminate environmental programs. Fewer and fewer students are able to take part in related classroom instruction and field investigations, however effective or popular. State and local administrators and teachers point to two factors behind this recent and disturbing shift: the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and a lack of funding for these critical programs.

Conceptually, NCLB has taken a positive step forward by giving states and schools greater authority and flexibility in exchange for more accountability regarding student performance. According to environmental education organizations, one unintentional consequence of the law's testing requirements has been that many schools have abandoned environmental education programs to invest more time and resources in math and reading instruction. In the classroom, NCLB causes science teachers to bypass environmental science when it does not appear to relate directly to state tests. Beyond the classroom, teachers have to forego valuable, hands-on field investigations rather than take time away from test-related instruction.

The American public recognizes that the environment is already one of the dominant issues of the 21st century. A National Science Foundation panel echoed that conviction, noting in 2003 that "in the coming decades, the public will more frequently be called upon to understand complex environmental issues, assess risk, evaluate proposed environmental plans and understand how individual decisions affect the environment at local and global scales. Creating a scientifically informed citizenry requires a concerted, systemic approach to environmental education..." In the private sector, business leaders also increasingly believe that an environmentally literate workforce is critical to their long-term success. They recognize that better, more efficient environmental practices improve the bottom line and help position their companies for the future.

The reauthorization of NCLB this year provides Congress with the opportunity to make changes that will strengthen the Act and better prepare students for real-world challenges and careers. NCLB must provide schools and school systems with the incentives, flexibility, and authority to develop and deliver environmental education programs.

Summary of the No Child Left Inside Act H.R. 3036 and S.1981

1. State Environmental Literacy Plans – NCLB Title II

To qualify for environmental education grant monies under Title II and Title V, a state educational agency must develop and submit a K-12 plan to the United States Department of Education for peer review and approval that will ensure that elementary and secondary school students are environmentally literate. The plan will be submitted by the state educational agency in consultation with state natural resource and environmental agencies and with input from the public. A state educational agency may submit an existing state plan that has been developed by or in cooperation with state environmental organizations provided that the plan meets specified requirements. State plans must include: relevant content standards, content areas, and courses or subjects where instruction will take place; a description of the relationship of the plan to state graduation requirements; a description of programs for professional development of teachers to improve their environmental content knowledge, skill in teaching about environmental issues, and field-based pedagogical skills; a description of how the state educational agency will measure the environmental literacy of students; and a description of how the state educational agency will implement the plan, including securing funding and other necessary support. A state educational agency may use state funds for the development of the State Environmental Literacy Plan¹.

2. Grants for Enhancing Education through Environmental Education – NCLB Title II

Creates an environmental education grant program for teacher professional development and student programs (modeled on the Math/Science Partnership in Title II of NCLB). The purpose of this grant program is to ensure the academic achievement of students in environmental literacy through the professional development of teachers and educators and outdoor learning experiences for students. One hundred million dollars are authorized to be appropriated to carry out this grant program and the state environmental literacy plans² for fiscal year 2008 and each of the 4 succeeding fiscal years. The United States Department of Education awards grants to state educational agencies, to whom eligible partnerships apply for these grants. Eligible partnerships include a local educational agency and may include: a teacher training department of an institution of higher education; an environmental department of an institution of higher education; another local education agency, a public charter school, a public or private³ elementary school or secondary school, or a consortium of such schools; a state environmental or natural resource management agency or a local environmental or natural resource management agency⁴; a business⁵; or a nonprofit or for-profit organization of demonstrated effectiveness in improving the quality of environmental education teachers, such as through outdoor environmental education experiences⁶.

3. Environmental Education Grant Program to Help Build National Capacity – NCLB Title V

Creates an environmental education grant program to help build national capacity by providing funds for the development, improvement, and advancement of environmental education. This grant program also supports the dissemination of proven environmental educational models, studies of national significance, and the development of new state or national financing sources for environmental education. Eligible recipients of these grants from the United States Department of Education include nonprofit organizations, state educational agencies, local educational agencies, or institutions of higher education that have demonstrated expertise and experience in the development of the institutional, financial, intellectual, or policy resources needed to help the field of environmental education become more effective and widely practiced.

¹ Sentence not included in S.1981.

² Phrase not included in H.R.3036.

³ Word not included in S.1981.

⁴ Phrase not included in H.R.3036.

⁵ Word not included in S.1981.

⁶ Phrase not included in H.R.3036.