

## **No Child Left Inside Bills Support Environmental Education**

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I worry a lot about the environment. On this autumn's unseasonably warm October days, it's hard not to be reminded about the effects of global warming that we already can see and feel. I picked up some new ice traps the other day and I wonder how thin the ice will be this winter and how short the ice-fishing season will be.

What I worry about most, however, is how to teach our children what is happening to our environment and what they can possibly do about it. People only care about what they know about. I worry that if young people grow up without enjoying and appreciating the natural world, they won't care enough about it to prevent its demise.

Preserving the environment is not a one-generation assignment, and it will take the active, passionate commitment of the generation now in school to continue the struggle.

Schools, unfortunately, have not been in a good position to rise to this challenge. As a school board member, I know how much already is demanded of schools and teachers, and the No Child Left Behind Act actually has increased those burdens.

By forcing schools to focus more attention on getting students to pass the mandated English and math tests, it has squeezed the time available for all other subjects. Our school board recently adopted new district goals, which include the promotion of environmental education at all levels. The staff expressed concern about how they could work toward fulfilling this goal.

That's why I am very excited about bills recently introduced in both houses of Congress. The proposed No Child Left Inside Act of 2007 would provide our school systems more resources to develop environmental education programs for our children without creating another mandate to lay upon our overburdened teachers.

The bills have bipartisan support in both the House (H.R. 3036) and in the Senate (S. 1981). Susan Collins is a co-sponsor of the Senate bill. The bills provide funds to states for teacher training in environmental education, including outdoor learning, as well as for developing rigorous standards and establishing statewide environmental literacy plans.

The new revenue sources for Maine school districts and the enhanced educational experiences they create would be a wonderful complement to the Maine State Department of Conservation's new "Take It Outside" campaign.

The national campaign for the legislation has been led by the No Child Left Inside Coalition, which now includes more than 110 state and national groups with combined

membership of 15 million members (including Maine Audubon, Maine Environmental Education Association and Maine Recreation and Park Association).

The legislation will allow us to improve environmental education to help a new generation face the immense challenges facing the environment.

But environmental education also is valuable from a personal as well as a global perspective. In my involvement with Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts or on class trips with my children, I always see children fascinated by the outdoors.

It's not just walking a trail through the woods and appreciating the cool breezes. When students understand how animals use a particular area for food or shelter, or how one plant reacts to another, it opens up a whole different world to them. I have yet to see a child who was indifferent to that.

I recently was volunteering on a class trip with my daughter at a lakeside camp when we heard a kingfisher call from a tree above us. One of my daughter's friends said it was a blue jay. I explained about kingfishers, how they dive for their food and where they live. The eyes lit up -- the fascination was there.

We need environmental education so that children do not grow up thinking that the world outside their door has no impact on their lives. We need them to appreciate the diversity of life and the fragile web of relationships that maintains that diversity. We cannot afford for them to be indifferent.

All of us can help protect our environment from indifference. Your voice in support of the No Child Left Inside Act will make a huge difference in how individual members of Congress act. Now is the time to urge Sen. Olympia Snowe to join as a co-sponsor of S. 1981 and Reps. Mike Michaud and Tom Allen to co-sponsor H.R. 3036, or to at least support, this legislation.

I urge everyone to make your voice heard, for our children and for our world.

***Doug Beck is a member of the Monmouth School Board and immediate past president of the Maine Recreation and Park Association.***