



Environmental Education and the No Child Left Behind Act

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 national crisis facing environmental education is compounded by a lack of funding. The National Environmental Education Act, the primary source of federal support for K-12 environmental education, provided only \$6.6 million last year, an average of only \$132,000 per state.

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 Environmental Education Changes Sought in NCLB

1. Title V – Create a separate Environmental Education grant program to help build national and state capacity

At the national and state level there is a need to build the “educational infrastructure” necessary to support environmental education. This section will provide funds for states to develop, improve, and advance environmental education standards. It will also support the development of new state-level private/public financing sources and dissemination of proven environmental educational models and studies of national significance.

2. Title II - Create a separate Environmental Education grant program for teacher training as well as identify Environmental Education as an eligible activity for the existing pool of teacher training funds

Create a separate environmental education grant program for teacher training which is modeled on the Math/Science Partnerships to ensure that a sufficient number of qualified teachers are available to teach these courses and programs while strengthening existing environmental education teacher training programs.

3. Title V – Include Environmental Education as an Authorized Program in the *Fund for the Improvement of Education*

The *Fund for the Improvement of Education* is an important source of funding for states and school superintendents, and is only available for specified activities. Including environmental education as an authorized use for these funds will enable more funding to flow to environmental education programs.

4. Title II – State Environmental Literacy Plans

To qualify for environmental education grant monies under Title II and Title V, each state must develop and submit a K-12 plan to ensure that high school graduates are environmentally literate. States will submit implementation status reports.

Note: “No Child Left Inside” is used with permission from the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection.