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Governor Martin O'Malley
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education & Labor
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education
Patuxent Wildlife Refuge, Laurel, MD
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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Castle, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and welcome to the great State of Maryland -- we are honored to have you here. Before I offer some words in support of the legislation you are considering today, I wanted to take a brief moment to recognize Congressman Sarbanes, whose leadership and partnership have been so critical to our efforts to return Maryland to progress.

Mr. Chairman, Martin Luther King said that the mark of a true education is "intelligence plus character." That's really what this legislation is about. If we truly wish to prepare our children for the challenges of tomorrow, we must recognize that education can be about so much more than reading, writing and arithmetic.

At its core, true education is about teaching our children to be responsible citizens of the world – about instilling them with the ideal that each individual can make a difference, and that all of us must try.

There is no better time than Earth Day to discuss ways to impress upon our children the virtue of service to the common good. Earth Day is a time we set aside each year to remind one another that all of us must "think globally and act locally" – that each of our individual actions have global consequences, and that there is a unity to spirit and matter, and the things we do in this life do matter.

WHY THIS LEGISLATION MATTERS

Here in Maryland, we recognize the importance of providing opportunities for citizens to recreate outdoors and we are committed to getting kids re-connected to nature. There is no better way to demonstrate the paramount importance of this issue, than to make sure that all students, regardless of socio-economic status, have the opportunity to experience our great outdoors.

When students are taught environmental education in schools, we know that their learning is enhanced, and that they have better problem solving skills than students who don't use the environment as an integrated learning context.



Research has shown us that spending time outside of the classroom for learning during the school day is important to the intellectual, emotional, and physical health of our children. Moreover, exposing students to the natural world can improve their overall academic success, self-esteem, sense of community, personal health and understanding of the environment.

This issue goes even beyond the scope of environmental education by considering how children grow and learn, and by looking holistically at their development. We must provide for their physical, emotional, and intellectual aptitude.

I believe we must pursue every avenue to reconnect our children with their natural world before it is too late. Environmental education increases student engagement in science, improves student achievement in core subject areas such as reading and math, and increases student awareness about individual actions they can take to restore the health of the natural environment. It is incumbent upon us to make a commitment that will ensure that our children grow to become informed and responsible stewards of the environment. It is our responsibility to make sure they are prepared to address future environmental challenges and opportunities as individual citizens, as members of the workforce, and as parents who will prepare their own children to live responsibly in our world.

Our schools must play a special role in bringing our young people closer to nature because there are increasingly less opportunities for children to enjoy nature outside of the school setting. In these difficult economic times, when parents are working harder and struggling to pay bills, it can be difficult to find the extra time – or for those who do not live in proximity to open space, the extra money – to share the outdoors with their children.

Additionally, when it comes to our kids' attention, nature has a lot of competition these days. Between television, the internet, video games and other distractions, it is fair to say that going for a hike or enjoying the outdoors is not always on the top of every child's wish-list.

As we work at the state level to implement more environmental education opportunities in our schools, the No Child Left Inside bill would provide significant assistance through grants and support, and counterbalancing portions of the No Child Left Behind law which scaled back hands-on learning opportunities and environmental education.

MARYLAND'S RESPONSE

Maryland intends to be a national leader in assuring that school-aged children have opportunities to learn from nature. As a major step toward this goal, on April 18, 2008, I signed an Executive Order directing Maryland state agencies to work together, along with local, private and non-profit partners, to help our kids reconnect with nature through every avenue available to us. The Executive Order has four key components that will help us ensure no Maryland child is left inside:

1. Partnership for Children in Nature

The Executive Order establishes a Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature that again, includes government agencies and NGOs, to oversee a multitude of state initiatives that will be implemented through public and private partnerships. This Partnership has been tasked with ensuring the development and implementation of a number of key new initiatives; the Partnership will also be responsible for identifying new funding for these initiatives and for evaluating our progress and the progress of our children.

2. State-wide Environmental Literacy Plan

The Partnership has been tasked with developing a state-wide Environmental Literacy Plan to ensure students are exposed to the natural environment at school.

This plan will examine model outdoor programs, model curriculum and professional development opportunities for teachers. It will also look at graduation standards to make sure we are producing environmentally literate graduates. To accomplish this, we will need to identify current resources, existing standards, and current model programs that provide students with meaningful outdoor experiences. As such, we must make sure that our teachers are prepared to provide these types of experiences for students by providing them with exemplary professional development opportunities.

Maryland is fortunate to have some important tools already in place: We have an Environmental Education By-law, we have the Chesapeake 2000 Commitment to provide every student with a Meaningful Watershed or Outdoor Experience, and we have environmental issues integrated into our learning standards. But, we can and must go farther. We will track whether or not our students are graduating as environmentally literate citizens, and we will measure our successes and improve in areas that need improvement.

3. Increase Opportunities for Outdoor Learning

The Partnership is also tasked with increasing opportunities for outdoor learning by connecting our Department of Natural Resources camps and other outdoor programs to state learning standards, and by engaging at-risk youth in outdoor restoration and recreation activities.

By offering more opportunities for structured outdoor learning, it will be easier for teachers to justify attending outdoor programs during the school day by aligning them with the Voluntary State Curriculum learning standards. In this way, students are still learning required content material while being exposed to the outdoors.

Research has shown that exposure to natural areas through mentors dramatically increases stewardship and the willingness to make positive environmental choices. That is why we aim to increase the availability of park naturalists and train staff specifically to work with school groups.

We also aim to increase minority visitation to state public lands. All too often, minorities don't see themselves as being an important contributor to environmental issues. However, the decisions that all of us make on a collective basis have a dramatic impact on the environment. That is why it is important to make the extra effort to reach out to those communities that feel disenfranchised or may not have the resources or background to make informed decisions about the environment.

Additionally, we are particularly excited about our new Civic Justice Corps through which we are recruiting court-involved youth to participate in a summer service program at our State Parks and other conservation lands. On a parallel track we are also recruiting disadvantaged youth from our underserved urban communities — beginning this summer in Baltimore City — to participate in a similar program. Participants in both programs will earn an hourly wage while they conduct conservation projects, engage in nature immersion experiences and develop marketable job skills for our increasingly green economy.

4. Provide Opportunities for Structured and Unstructured Play

At the state level, we are also looking at ways to provide opportunities for youth to have structured and unstructured time in natural settings for both play and learning. As a result of abundant time spent playing outdoors young people form deep and personal bonds with nature. This connection inspires and motivates children to become stewards of the environment, and enriches their physical and mental well-being.

We want to connect communities with local and state parks through the development of walkable trails that will encourage visitation to these areas. By connecting schools to these public lands, we can encourage outdoor education, environmental clubs, and awareness of the importance of these open spaces.

By expanding schoolyard habitat programs, we will be converting asphalt and empty lawns into natural landscapes that serve as dynamic learning tools for students. Teachers from all subject areas can utilize these spaces, demonstrating to students that math, science, language arts, and physical education are not disconnected and discreet subject areas, but rather integrated topics that enhance their learning.

We will work with private and local entities to develop policies and plans that promote natural play areas. This incentive-based program will provide for the improvement of natural play zones in the undeveloped pockets of local parks and urban and suburban neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

We must take actions to ensure that young people develop this stewardship ethic. These actions should manifest themselves through federal, state, local and private initiatives. The No Child Left Inside Act of 2007 will make the United States a world leader in developing this stewardship ethic on a national scale; it will serve as an example for state jurisdictions to do the same on a localized scale; it will set the stage for a sustainable future; and most importantly, it will put the physical, intellectual and spiritual needs of our children first.

As we recognize Earth Day, we must also recognize that the decisions we make in the here and now will determine what type of planet we leave our children. Will we create a generation of environmental stewards who realize humankind's sacred responsibility to our land, our water, and our air? Will they treat our planet better than we did? Will they allow the circumstances they inherit to change them, or will they feel that desire in their hearts to change their circumstances?

If we invest in environmental education today, it is our belief that there will come a time when our young people graduate high school not only with the intellectual ability to tackle complex environmental challenges – but also with the will and desire to care for and save our planet.

Thank you.

Attachments:

Executive Order

Children in Nature Strategic Plan