



American Forest Foundation



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Press Release

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Environmental Education Gaining Support as National Priority

Washington, DC—Environmental education may not yet be mainstream by this 39th anniversary of Earth Day, but there is growing recognition that it should be, with record levels of new funding that would be proposed under a U.S. Senate and House bills introduced today as the “No Child Left Inside Act of 2009.” The bills would provide \$100 million in new grants to schools that have adopted environmental literacy plans to provide environmental and outdoor educational opportunities for students and professional development for teachers.

Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Congressman John Sarbanes (D-MD) introduced the bipartisan bills this afternoon. The No Child Left Inside Coalition, one of the fastest-growing advocacy coalitions in the past two years with 1,300 member organizations representing over 50 million individuals, applauds the introduction. The environmental literacy movement has broad support from environmental, educational, business, public health, outdoor recreation, and conservation groups.

“This is an issue whose time has finally come and we thank Senator Reed and Representative Sarbanes for their leadership,” said Kathy McGlaufflin, Senior Vice President of the American Forest Foundation, whose Project Learning Tree (PLT) is one of the largest and longest-running (32 years) environmental education programs in the U.S. “There is widespread agreement that environmental education programs help the kids learn, help their communities through service-learning programs, and help teachers in preparing students for 21st century careers.” Project Learning Tree is a leading member of the No Child Left Inside Coalition.

Congressional sponsors say now is the time to establish funding for environmental education as part of the core funding for education, not as an under-funded add-on. “Teaching children about the environment and giving them a hands-on opportunity to experience nature should be an important part of the curriculum in our schools. This legislation will free up critical funding for environmental education to inspire the next generation of scientists and conservationists,” said Senator Reed, a member of both the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee and the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees federal spending on education programs. “This legislation is a smart investment in our children’s future and the future of our planet.”

“We must educate our youth to be environmental stewards and grow the next generation of scientists and innovators to solve our energy and environmental challenges,” said Congressman John Sarbanes. “By preparing the next generation to meet these challenges, we will accomplish environmental, economic and national security policy objectives in one fell swoop.”

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Many education groups are banking on increased support from the Obama administration, which has repeatedly voided its support for enhancing the quality of education in America, and environmental educators want to make sure their programs can catch up after years of funding neglect under “No Child Left Behind,” the federal law that emphasized teaching that directly enhanced test scores and provided no direct funding for environmental education.

Yet anecdotal evidence is growing that outdoor learning opportunities, as part of a comprehensive environmental education program, can increase test scores. Beatrice Long, a 7th-8th grade science teacher at Seabrook Intermediate School in Houston, Texas, and an award-winning National Outstanding Environmental Educator this year, says she uses Project Learning Tree curriculum to help increase her students’ scores on standardized tests. “Teaching to the tests” is not the solution,” said Long. “You improve test scores by engaging the kids in learning projects that excite their imagination and stimulate critical thinking skills. Outdoor learning is ideal for that.”

Netosh Jones, a third-grade teacher in the District of Columbia, says she depends on PLT environmental learning activities to engage her kids in lots of hands-on activities that the kids really like, including a recent community garden installation. She particularly likes that the activities are directly tied to the established learning standards.

“PLT applies the same standards and pacing as the school system does. So that helps me a lot in my planning,” said Jones. “I can go to my PLT activity guide and gets stories, ideas, and projects on specific standards—like on energy issues, for example.” Principal Dr. Valoria Baylor said the new garden helps beautify the school and connect it to the community. “Our partnership with PLT has helped them [the students] see they are part of the Anacostia community and integral to the city.”

Funding for environmental learning programs varies greatly from state to state. In 2007, each state received only \$132,000 on average for environmental education under the National Environmental Education Act—one of the main sources of such funding. That breaks down to just 71 cents for each of the more than 93,000 public elementary and secondary schools.”

PLT leader Kathy McGlaufflin said she hopes the No Child Left Inside Act can help to reverse the funding and policy vacuum for environmental education under No Child Left Behind. “People don’t realize that a large portion of the environmental education that happens in this country today occurs *only* because nonprofit groups like ours provide support, funding, and quality curriculum.” PLT trains 30,000 new environmental educators every year.

McGlaufflin and a growing number of supporters in Congress agree that environmental education is too important to be left to private charity and that it needs to be part of the core curriculum.

Project Learning Tree® (PLT) is the environmental education program of the American Forest Foundation. PLT provides educators with comprehensive environmental education curriculum resources that can be integrated into lesson plans for all grades and subject areas. PLT teaches students “how to think, not what to think” about complex environmental issues, and helps students learn the skills they need to make sound choices about the environment.

Developed in 1976, PLT has an international network of more than 500,000 trained educators using PLT materials that cover the total environment. The American Forest Foundation, a nonprofit organization, works for healthy forests, quality environmental education, and informed decision-making about our communities and our world.