

# Policy on Green Schools and Environmental Education

Students sitting in classrooms today are the future of the American economy. They will be the ones building, designing, teaching, selling, implementing, and maintaining all the facets of industries that will drive the global economy. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides federal policymakers with an opportunity and responsibility to provide them with the necessary foundation to shape and participate in that future economy.

To do so successfully, they will need to attain a level of environmental literacy and occupational skills to navigate a carbon-constrained world in which clean energy will be the most important economic development race of states and nations. They will require learning environments that are safe and healthy and that model the green future that we must rely on them to build.

Our country's future competitiveness relies on the success of its students. If they fail, we all do. We can help our children achieve the foundation they need by making some common-sense reforms to Elementary and Secondary Education Act as Congress reauthorizes the Act.

We recommend that these include:

## Mutual Responsibility for Ensuring Our Students' Success

Accountability is a word often used today, but responsibility for what happens in our public schools must extend to parents, principals, administrators and communities—in addition, of course, to teachers and students. All of us have a role to play in ensuring that students and staff work and learn in a healthy environment; that staff are qualified and are provided a rich curriculum, adequate resources and time to teach; and that measuring the effectiveness of the delivery of education take into account all the factors that affect student achievement.

## Green and Healthy Schools

Green schools are productive learning environments that are healthy for students, school staff, and the planet. On average, green schools save \$100,000 per year — enough to hire two new teachers, buy 200 new computers or purchase 5,000 new textbooks.

## Improving Existing Programs

Reauthorization serves as an opportunity to improve several existing educational facility programs in the ESEA, which can fund greatly needed construction and modernization of school buildings. As Congress works to reauthorize and reform ESEA, we recommend reforms to several specific programs to promote cost-effective, high performing, healthy green schools for America's children, including:

### *Fund for the Improvement of Education (Title V, Part D, Subpart 18)*

The Fund provides grants to state and local educational agencies for the construction and renovation of healthy, high-performance schools that have enhanced energy efficiency and indoor air quality. With 21 sub-programs under the Fund and no formula for allocation, we recommend removing the Healthy, High-Performance Schools program from the Fund and authorizing separate appropriations for Healthy, High Performance Schools. Provisions of the program should be strengthened to ensure holistic building and operations of school facilities.

***Impact Aid (Title XIII, Section 8007 – Construction)***

This section provides grants for modernization and construction of school facilities designated to receive Impact Aid funding. Sixty percent of the funds are distributed as formula and 40 percent as competitive grants. We recommend that fund allocation should be amended so that at least 50 percent of the funds are administered via competitive grants. Projects that enhance energy efficiency, indoor air quality, sustainable building materials, and water conservation along with expedition of project completion and cost-efficiency maximization should be prioritized.

***Bureau of Indian Affairs Funded School Construction and Renovation (Title X, Part E — Bureau of Indian Affairs Programs, Sec 1125)***

This section provides financial support for school building construction or renovation on or near American Indian reservations and Indian land trusts. We recommend that standards relating to facilities construction under Bureau of Indian Affairs Programs should be reviewed and strengthened in accordance with green criteria.

***Green Ribbon Schools******Implementation and Encouragement of the Green Ribbon Schools Program***

The Green Ribbon Schools program is a proposed initiative of the Department of Education to set a high benchmark for greening our schools. This program would annually recognize and honor those public and private elementary, middle and high schools that demonstrate high achievement in both student learning and eliminating or reducing their environmental footprint and improving learning conditions including using the built or natural environment as a learning laboratory, as outdoor educational experiences have been shown to improve academic interest. In short, a green school should aim to create a healthy, environmentally and socially responsible living and learning environment for all students and staff.

**Environmental Literacy and Education**

An accountability system narrowly focused on test scores has resulted in many school districts narrowing their curriculum thereby sacrificing art, music, and environmental education classes and outdoor learning experiences for their students. This needs to change so that children are exposed to a broader and rich curriculum that includes the subjects listed above.

***Incorporating Environmental Education in the Broader Framework***

We must start with providing children an adequate basis in environmental education. President Obama's Blueprint for Reforming ESEA highlighted what it will take to make children "college and career ready" and what rounds out a "complete education." We strongly

urge that environmental education be a significant part of both of these platforms.

Environmental education should also be explicitly incorporated into the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) platform of ESEA as an eligible activity, and field experiences in particular should be encouraged and included when lab experience is mentioned. Research indicates that outdoor, experiential learning increases interest in STEM fields.

In particular, ESEA reauthorization should include reforms that are proposed in the No Child Left Inside Act (S. 866 and H.R. 2054). The Act:

- Provides funding incentives to states, as a prerequisite to receiving implementation grants, to develop environmental literacy plans, approved by the Secretary of Education, for pre-kindergarten through grade 12 that include environmental education standards and teacher training.
- Directs the Secretary to award Environmental Education Professional Development Grants to states and, through them, competitive subgrants to partnerships for activities involving, among other things, teacher training and the development of more rigorous environmental education curricula that advance the teaching of interdisciplinary courses.
- Authorizes the Secretary to award competitive matching grants to partnerships for activities to improve and support environmental education that include: (1) advancing content and achievement standards; (2) developing or disseminating innovations or model programs, including using the environment as an integrating theme across content areas and providing interdisciplinary instruction along with field experience that allow students to directly experience nature; and (3) research.

In addition to the reforms outlined as part of the No Child Left Inside Act, environmental education should be included as an eligible activity for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers.

***Outdoor Learning Experiences***

We should strive to encourage a greater engagement between children and the natural environment. Direct experiences with the natural world during the school years have been shown to lead to positive attitudes towards the environment in adulthood. Outdoor experiences during the school day will help develop interest among children in participating or leading in a greener economic future. A study by the [California Department of Education](#) found that participation in outdoor experiential learning led to significant improvements in science test scores and classroom behavior. Other studies have shown that this type of education increases test scores in all subjects and improves student behavior, creativity and critical thinking.

Finally, climate change presents the most expansive environmental, economic, and geopolitical problem in human history. It is a problem we must address now, and our children and grandchildren must learn to deal with. This is why we must ensure that students of today are properly educated about the inevitable effects of a certain level of climate change, how to adapt, and how to mitigate worse effects.

### *Occupational Health and Safety*

The beauty of green schools and environmental education is that it teaches that moral stewardship of the Earth is paramount to the survival of the planet for people. However, an emphasis on energy and resource efficiency, reduction of carbon emissions and a lessened environmental impact is incomplete without an explicit accounting of the safety and health of workers. Environmental literacy and education must include the concept of sustainability framed in terms of environmental, economic and occupational health goals grounded in principles of social justice.

### *Study of National Significance*

A national study of the effectiveness of environmental literacy, both as a separate subject and as an integrating theme, in preparing students to become environmentally literate as well as to improve achievement in core academic subjects needs to be added.



**The BlueGreen Alliance is a national, strategic partnership between labor unions and environmental organizations dedicated to expanding the number and quality of jobs in the green economy.**

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