

Support Environmental Literacy

Learning how humans impact the environment, and understanding the value of Virginia's extraordinary natural resources, are essential parts of our state education standards.

Leading educators and the Virginia Department of Education recognize that hands-on, inquiry-based learning outside has myriad benefits for environmental education and academic achievement more broadly.

Unfortunately, many school districts are not connected to the curriculum resources, professional development, or local programs they need in order to offer these types of learning opportunities to all students.

Students in urban communities, Southside Virginia districts, and small rural school districts are most likely to be left behind.

Therefore, we urge legislators to support budget allocations of \$1 million annually for a competitive grant program to provide Meaningful Watershed Education Experiences (MWEEs)—and expand the program to the entire Commonwealth. MWEEs are learner-centered frameworks that focus on investigations into local environmental issues and lead to informed action.

MWEEs are made up of multiple components that include learning both outdoors and in the classroom and are designed to increase environmental literacy by actively engaging students in building knowledge and meaning through hands-on experiences.

Virginia's current investments of just 30¢ per student in environmental education lags significantly behind neighboring states, falling 89.2% below Maryland (\$2.78 per student) and 48.3% less than Pennsylvania (58¢ per student). Without increased investment, Virginia's students are at risk of being left behind.

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Aside from inspiring stewardship and reconnecting young people to Virginia's local rivers, streams, and other natural resources, according to Stanford research, environmental education has a positive impact on student achievement not only in science but in math, reading, and social studies.

Students become more engaged in learning because they are having fun and are directly involved in meaningful inquiry.

In addition, environmental education has been proven to build critical thinking and relationship skills, foster leadership qualities, and offer all students equal chances for academic success.

Environmental education also contributes to improved health outcomes. Experiences "in the field" as part of the regular school curriculum get kids outside, contributing to healthy lifestyles through exercise, play, and experience in the natural world. It helps address a worrisome trend that today's children spend half as much time outside as kids did just 20 years ago and, on average, spend seven hours every day plugged into electronic media.

Environmental education is critical to preparing students for the 21st century workforce. The National Science Foundation's National Science Board concluded in its report, *Environmental Science and Engineering for the 21st Century*, that "changes should be made in the formal educational system to help all students, educators, and educational administrators learn about the environment, the economy, and social equity as they relate to all academic disciplines and their daily lives."

Our organizations urge legislators to support funding of environmental education programs so all students across the Commonwealth can take part in outdoor learning experiences.

