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April 20, 2000

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An Earth Week call for K-12 Environmental Education

Reinstating DPI specialist, assessing Environmental Literacy would help

MADISON--Wisconsin has a rich history as a leader in promoting environmental education in K-12 schools, but it is time to renew that commitment across the state.

State lawmakers, educators and environmental leaders underscored that message today, saying they support efforts to reinstate an important environmental education position in the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The Environmental Education Renewal Act was unveiled during a press conference at the state capitol.

The Wisconsin Environmental Education Board (WEEB) proposes legislation that would reinstate the position of Environmental Education Coordinator in the DPI. Legislators who are members of WEEB include Senators Brian Rude and Brian Burke and Representatives Mark Miller and Neal Kedzie. The measure would also require that the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction assess environmental literacy by using the already-required statewide assessments of state K-12 students.

The lawmakers agreed that Earth Week is a good time to recognize what's been accomplished on behalf of the environment in the past 30 years and to push forward with efforts to improve environmental education in state schools.

"We must make sure our children receive objective, comprehensive environmental education in our schools," said state Sen. Kevin Shibilski, D-Stevens Point, a sponsor of the proposal.

"This is a modest proposal, but it's a new call to action for environmental education in Wisconsin," state Rep. Mark Miller, D-Monona, said.

The position of environmental education specialist in the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) was eliminated in 1994. This proposal will restore the funding for the position.

A recent survey of state schools showed that many school districts haven't enacted curriculum plans and many others haven't implemented the plans that were adopted.

Wisconsin requires its school districts to develop, implement and evaluate environmental education curriculum plans. It was the first state in the nation to require training in environmental education as a condition of teacher certification.

"Wisconsin has a rich legacy of environmental stewardship. Leaders like Aldo Leopold, former U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson and former Gov. Warren Knowles planted the first seeds," said state Sen. Brian Rude, R-Coon Valley. "This week, when we celebrate the 30th anniversary of Earth Day, we can start a new call to action."

Reinstating the DPI position has also received support from the Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education (WAEE) and citizens across the state.

"Reinstating that position would be a big help as we renew efforts to make sure our school districts incorporate environmental education curriculum plans, just as they do other important curriculum plans," said Rick Wilke, a Natural Resources professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Wilke is University of Wisconsin System Distinguished Professor of Environmental Education and a member of WEEB.

It's also important that Wisconsin incorporate environmental literacy into already mandated state assessments of K-12 students, Wilke said. "The DPI environmental education consultant could help accomplish this," Wilke said.

Supporters of the proposal cited findings from a Graduate Research Seminar in the College of Natural Resources at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. A cross-section of Wisconsin school districts was surveyed. The survey was completed in December 1999. Some findings:

- Only 40 percent of teachers surveyed said they were satisfied with their school district Environmental Education Curriculum Plan.
- 37 percent of K-12 curriculum coordinators surveyed indicated that their school districts didn't have an Environmental Education Curriculum Plan. Another 7 percent were uncertain.
- 85 percent of teachers surveyed supported reinstating the Environmental Education Consultant position in the Department of Public Instruction.
- 79 percent of teachers surveyed said they believed reinstating the DPI position would assist them in implementing an Environmental Education Curriculum.
- 96 percent of teachers surveyed said it is important to develop and implement an Environmental Education Curriculum Plan.

While expressing concern about portions of the survey, Wilke noted that it also produced some positive results. "Ninety-six percent of teachers said it is important to develop and implement an Environmental Education Curriculum Plan," Wilke said.

The Wisconsin Environmental Education Board is a 15-member board created by the Wisconsin Legislature to monitor the state's progress on environmental education. The Wisconsin Association for Environmental Education is the state's professional organization for teachers and naturalists.