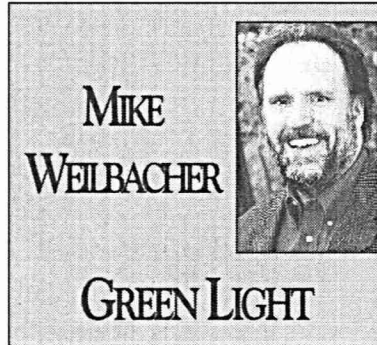


At long last! No Child Left Inside bill

Bastille Day was a huge one for me, a grizzled environmental educator who has been teaching about nature and the environment since, yikes, 1975, and my ilk: the No Child Left Inside Coalition promoting a bill co-sponsored by some 20 senators (like Pennsylvania's Casey) and 100-plus congressmen stormed the Capitol steps to introduce eagerly awaited legislation mandating that our kids become environmentally literate.



And I am fiercely praying this doesn't get lost in the ill wind blowing through Washington these days.

Its nickname, of course, is the environmental-education (EE) movement's twist on the "No Child Left Behind" initiatives of the last decade.

The No Child Left Inside Coalition is massive, a serious alliance of almost 2,000 business, education, environmental and other groups representing 50 million Americans, spearheaded by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and including, locally, the Riverbend EE Center and Haverford Middle and Exton Elementary schools. This is easily one of the largest assemblages of conservation groups in history.

Environmental educators have been increasingly concerned that too much attention to test scores in only a few subjects has resulted in measurable declines in outdoor time and recess. Reeling from budget cuts, schools are abandoning field trips, so children – who rarely go outside at home either – now spend the lion's share of the school day chained to desks, number-2 pencils at the ready.

Ironically, a huge and growing body of research indicates that test scores rise – as does emotional, physical and mental health – when students are exposed to education in the outdoors. Serious. Numerous studies indicate that children who spend quality time in the outdoors are smarter, happier, healthier and better adjusted emotionally, a topic we last visited in an April piece on Radnor Middle School's legendarily successful and often replicated Watershed program, which uses the environment as a context for cross-curriculum learning. Students are motivated to learn, say, math if it has actual application in the real world: so how many wildflowers do we need to plant in a 4x10-foot plot if they are planted five inches apart? If you have to raise the money to plant them, you'll get the math right.

Our passion for making sure no child is left behind, while absolutely right in intent (especially if we are talking about urban kids with few resources and less hope for success), has backfired; the unintended consequence is that students are narrowly focusing on only the material taught on the test, the rest of the curriculum vanishing in a haze of preparations and exams.

Our retreat from the outdoors is exacerbated by budget cuts removing sports programs that shape students physically and emotionally. (While I

Editorial/Criticism

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----

was permanently scarred by my cigar-chomping soccer coach who derided me, the second slowest player on the varsity team, as "Blaze," a name usually yelled, there's no question my physical health was greatly enhanced. Thank God I was a heads-up player. Anyway.)

This new twist on "No Child" gives intense incentives to state education departments. Check this out: if you want access to federal education money of any kind, you must have approved an environmental-literacy plan – a plan that also mandates instructional time outdoors. There will even be funding for teacher training, so high-school teachers can visit Riverbend for workshops, and Riverbend can access grant funding for this new training.

While Pennsylvania is far ahead of other states in mandating EE programming in the curriculum since 1984, which makes many a state jealous, that instruction is not mandated to be outside, and too much EE happens out of context, on the computer or at a desk. And we don't yet have a literacy plan – but only last month an advisory group that includes educators of all flavors met to begin collaborating on and drafting our state's plan, so we're not left outside the fun.

"No Child Left Behind," by the way, was the Bush Administration's very clever renaming of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the routine education-funding bill, which needs to be re-authorized every five years. We're now deep into year seven, I believe, so educators are hoping this bill happens for many reasons. Obama has gone back to the bland-vanilla name, which is fine, but this twist is added as an overlay into the bill.

Locally, only Joe Sestak of Congress' Seventh District, that unwieldy swath of turf that stretches from beyond King of Prussia along Route 422 all the way to the Delaware state line, co-sponsors the bill; of the 100-plus in Congress, only three other Pennsylvanians are listed. While the coalition insists the bill is bipartisan, only a couple of Republican senators are listed, along with one Republican congressman. The bill's sponsorship is heavily Democratic.

One would hope that teaching kids about the environment in the outdoors is not a one-party priority, especially if the overwhelming body of evidence is that students learn better in the outdoors, even if what they are learning has nothing to do with the environment.

And they are healthier, too.

Last word goes to Don Baugh, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's vice president for education and director of the No Child Left Inside Coalition. "With critical environmental issues looming on the horizon, we should be reminded not to take environmental education for granted. There is nothing like hands-on environmental education to engage children and pique their curiosity. We are grateful to our sponsors for their bipartisan leadership in championing an issue that is so fundamental to our long-term success in educating the next generation of environmental stewards."

Amen.

Mike Weilbacher directed the Lower Merion Conservancy for 15 years and runs the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education in Philadelphia. If you want more information on the claims he makes herein, visit the Web sites of the No Child Left Inside Coalition (nclcoalition.org), the North American Association for Environmental Education (naaee.net) and the Children and Nature Network (childrenandnature.org). E-mail him at Mike.Weilbacher@schuylkillcenter.org.