

'Well-rounded' measure to include environment in 'No Child Left Behind' reform

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The environment would be written into federal education policy for the first time under an amendment expected to be offered and approved when senators reconvene a markup on a reform bill for the No Child Left Behind Act.

Those in the environmental education movement say it is a "huge" step for their cause and "signals that Congress recognizes the importance for environmental skills," said Danielle Moodie-Mills, senior manager of environmental education campaigns at the National Wildlife Foundation.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee yesterday began to mark up an overhaul of the 10-year-old No Child Left Behind Act, now known as the "Elementary and Secondary Education Act," or ESEA. The markup was halted when Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) objected based on a rule that requires unanimous consent for a meeting to last more than two hours.

The committee is expected to reconvene at 8 a.m. today, and when it does, environmental groups say they expect to see Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) offer his "well-rounded education" amendment, as it is being called.

Under the amendment, states would have access to a fund that would help them build curricula for a variety of subjects that education experts say have fallen by the wayside with the establishment of No Child Left Behind. That act focused attention on the so-called STEM subjects, or science, technology, engineering and math, and away from subjects like the environment.

Environmental groups that have worked with Casey's office say they are confident that environmental education will be included in that amendment, as well as arts, civics and government, economics, financial literacy, foreign languages, geography, health education, history, physical education and social studies.

"That will be a big boost for environmental literacy across the nation," said Don Baugh, director of the No Child Left Inside Coalition, a group that is advocating for legislation of the same name. "It's not the final step, but it's a very important, critical step in the right direction."

In 2008, the House passed the "No Child Left Inside Act" requiring states to develop environmental literacy plans, and since then, green schools groups have been working toward including the measure in larger federal legislation. More than 40 states have at least begun developing environmental literacy plans, and Maryland recently became the first state to include it in its graduation requirements.

Bipartisan lawmakers again introduced the "No Child Left Inside Act" earlier this year ([E&ENews PM](#), July 14).

When Senate HELP Chairman Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) announced that he would be bringing a reauthorization of ESEA up for markup, environmental education groups saw their chance.

"This was going to be fantastic, it was going to be bipartisan, and it was our opportunity to have No Child Left Behind or pieces of it included in the legislation," Moodie-Mills said.

The "well-rounded education" concept goes back to when President Obama introduced his blueprint for revising ESEA in March of 2010. He laid out a plan to create a pot of money for the subjects, including the environment, that have been squeezed out by No Child Left Behind.

This would be the first time the Department of Education has grant funds available specifically for environmental education at the K-12 level.

Casey's office confirmed that the senator was writing the amendment but did not offer any details on what will be included. Sean Miller, education director of the Earth Day Network, shared a copy of a draft amendment that includes environmental literacy.

Although environmental groups are praising the amendment, Jim Elder, director of the Campaign for Environmental Literacy, said there are both "pluses and minuses" to the measure. While the amendment would give the environmental education community access to funding, it would also put the subject in competition with a host of others for that funding.

"At the end of the day, that's not a very appropriate place for us to be, competing with other subjects that we feel are just as important in their own way," he said.

While the environmentalists are fairly certain the amendment will be approved, they are less certain about the future of the entire ESEA reform. There are currently 144 amendments being considered on the bill, and the measure is expected to generate a lot of controversy.

If the ESEA reform is passed by the Senate, it is unclear whether the House will accept such a measure. The House has taken a piecemeal approach to ESEA reform rather than putting up the entire act for changes. Environmental groups say they do not see much room for environmental education in the House's approach.

There is, however, bipartisan support for environmental education, unlike the acrimony shown toward environmental regulations and U.S. EPA.

"Most can find common ground in education," Elder said, "whereas they might not agree about drilling in ANWR or any other areas of environmental problems that we have."