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Schools scolded for not teaching lessons about environment

BY APRIL CASTRO - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
 December 02, 2007

AUSTIN – At a time of heightened concern over global warming and depleting ocean life, U.S. schoolchildren are not being taught some of the most basic environmental lessons, experts say.

While students are doing better at math and reading, watchdogs and teachers say the overwhelming focus on those core academic areas has left them surprisingly unaware of their own surroundings.

As Congress grapples to rewrite the six-year-old No Child Left Behind law, the science gap has become part of the debate.

"Young people are graduating from high school totally environmentally illiterate," said Brian A. Day, executive director of the North American Association for Environmental Education. "They neither know nor know how to find out how to address challenges, whether with lifestyle changes or public policy issues."

A recent study titled "Environmental Literacy in America" reports that as states focus more on standards and accountability testing, the amount of environmental education being taught in schools has "leveled off and may even be in decline for the first time in three decades."

The decline couldn't come at a worse time, critics say.

"We're at a time where, because of things like climate change – with more and more evidence that the climate is changing – all these issues are becoming increasingly acute, so we need to engage young people in addressing these issues, so we need to educate young people," said Delicia Reynolds, legislative counsel for Congressman John Sarbanes, D-Md., a sponsor of environmental education legislation in Congress known as No Child Left Inside.

Science teachers around the country are complaining that they no longer have the time and resources to take students on field trips, an element they say is key to earth science education.

Now some in Congress want to do something about it.

Early drafts of legislation to reauthorize No Child Left Behind puts more of an emphasis on environmental education and includes money to fund it.

"We have seen more interest since January on Capitol Hill for environmental education than we've seen in three decades," Day said. "The public is ahead of policy makers and policy makers are starting to look up and say 'my constituents want this.'"

Several education, science and business experts have been lobbying Congress to include science scores in school accountability measures.

"Although there's a lot of good things about No Child Left Behind ... there's a lot of unintended consequences, like schools having to choose to scale back or eliminate very important programs," Reynolds said.

The No Child Left Behind law, which President Bush signed in 2001 and is up for reauthorization this year, requires students to be tested annually in reading and math while in grades 3-8, and once in high school. Starting this year, schools will have to test students in science once in elementary, middle and high school, under a provision in the law. But states are not required to use science scores in mandatory progress measures, known as adequate yearly progress.

Legislation considered by the U.S. House earlier this year would have required schools to include science test scores in adequate yearly progress ratings. The issue is expected to come up again next year.

"If they don't test it, it's not going to get taught," said Jodi Peterson, assistant executive director for the National Association of Science Teachers.

Not everyone salutes the idea that topics such as global warming and environmental education should be included as part of the federally mandated curriculum.

"I don't think we need the federal government getting involved in telling the schools how to do certain things and testing in certain things," said Brooke Terry, an education policy analyst for the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation. "Just because No Child Left Behind looks at reading and math doesn't mean that states aren't holding schools accountable for science and testing or at least attempting to."

Since No Child Left Behind began, school districts have cut time on science to about 178 minutes a week, about a third of the time spent on English, according to a study by the Center on Education Policy earlier this year. By comparison, lunch gets 142 minutes per week.

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"It's happening at a time when environmental education has never been more important," Day said.
"The issues that we're dealing with aren't as simple as recycling."

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