



Sunday Forum: Back to school, back to the great outdoors

KATHLEEN PAUL and RUTH ROPERTI say we need more teachers who can enlighten students about the natural world

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Summer is quickly coming to a close and children will soon return to schools across Pennsylvania. For many of them, summer was spent indoors, glued to televisions, video games and computer screens -- and not outside.

The trend is clear: Our young people are losing touch with the environment. One national study found that young people can identify 1,000 corporate logos but fewer than 10 plants or animals native to their backyards.

More broadly, many of us in the environmental education field are deeply concerned that we are not doing enough nationally to educate our children about their natural environment and the immense challenges it faces, everything from climate change to the loss of sensitive habitats, whether it's along the Allegheny or the Amazon.

This situation requires immediate attention. We cannot expect the next generations to overcome the environmental problems being left to them without a solid understanding of the environment. Instilling environmental literacy and a love for the outdoors will produce many benefits. Children enjoy hiking, swimming and canoeing, and many of them need the exercise to counter the nation's childhood obesity crisis.

We're proud to say that Pennsylvania is a leader in environmental education, one of the few states that have created specific instructional standards related to the environment. Teachers are taught to weave important concepts, such as biodiversity, into the existing curriculum of reading, science, math and other subjects. Beginning this academic year, schools will include these environmental lessons on assessment tests. State policymakers deserve kudos for taking these important steps.

Nationally, though, environmental education is at a critical crossroads. Quite simply, America is not doing enough to support high-quality instruction in the environment. Congress has a chance to address this problem with pending legislation that would help all states make progress in environmental education.

The No Child Left Inside Act would increase funding for teacher training and the development of model programs. And it would give states new funding to develop environmental literacy plans to make sure their graduates have a basic knowledge of

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environmental concepts. Given the environmental challenges this country faces, we can't think of a more important goal.

The legislation has the support of large environmental groups such as Audubon and the National Wildlife Federation, as well as the National Education Association, which recognizes the importance of environmental education.

The results of a new focus on environmental education can be profound. We will prepare students to be environmentally literate. But we also know firsthand that environmental education can serve as a wonderful catalyst for young people. It engages them in their world and gives them a personal connection to what they're learning, whether it's examining wildlife in a nearby stream or learning to think about where their trash will end up if they don't recycle it.

Not surprisingly, studies have shown that students in schools with environmental instruction tend to do better on tests and in the classroom.

It's important to do more to help our young people reconnect with nature. On average, children spend six hours a day in front of the TV and computers, but less than four minutes a day in unstructured outdoor play, according to one study.

Unless we take action, complicated environmental concepts will become more and more foreign to our children. Environmental education should be a priority for both Pennsylvania and the nation. No child should finish school without a basic understanding of the natural world and the challenges it faces.

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