

## **Maryland Environmental Literacy Graduation Requirement: Key Questions and Answers**

### ***Q: What exactly is environmental literacy?***

The Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature defines environmental literacy as: students that possess the knowledge, intellectual skills, attitudes, experiences and motivation to make and act upon responsible environmental decisions as individuals and as members of their community. Environmentally literate students understand environmental and physical processes and systems, including human systems. They are able to weigh various sides of environmental issues to make responsible decisions as individuals and as members of their community and citizens of the world

***Q: In Fall 2010, the Maryland State Board of Education passed an environmental literacy graduation requirement. Why was the additional language passed in June 2011 necessary?*** In September 2010, the State Board of Education voted unanimously to approve environmental literacy requirement language (COMAR 13A.04.17). Shortly following this, the board agreed to consider additional language to provide clarification to school systems and ensure proper placement and alignment within the regulations (COMAR 13A.03.02). Initially, the additional language proposed by MSDE inadvertently provided a loophole that would allow school systems to simply accept “status quo” by satisfying the requirement with existing courses and it offered no oversight or incentive for school systems. In spring 2011, this language was revised to provide proper oversight and flexibility for school systems and was subsequently approved by the State Board of Education in June 2011. The result is a strong, clear environmental literacy graduation requirement mandating that public school systems provide all students with a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary EE program infused with the curriculum.

### ***Q: Why is an environmental literacy graduation requirement important?***

Although there are many great EE programs for some Maryland schools not *all* students have access to these programs and many programs are increasingly challenged by a curricular focus on reading and math testing requirements. The environmental literacy graduation requirement now mandates that all local school systems provide *all* public school students a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary EE program infused with the curriculum.

### ***Q: Won't another graduation requirement mean more work for teachers or students?***

The environmental literacy graduation requirement will *not* require an additional course or specific number of environmental education experiences. Successful implementation will focus on proper infusion of environmental content into existing curriculum. Local school systems would have the flexibility to design their own environmental literacy programs based on their unique local resources. Conversations with school system superintendents indicate that they feel implementation of the environmental literacy requirement is both doable and important to accomplish. It is also worth noting that the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers have been early and strong supporters of environmental literacy efforts.

### ***Q: Will there be assistance for school systems as they develop programs?***

Efforts are now under way to ensure a smooth integration of environmental content and experiences into existing curricula. The Maryland State Department of Education has established two workgroups to begin revising and aligning Maryland environmental literacy standards and developing guidelines to provide school systems with guidance and support for implementation.

### ***Q: Why are we focused on an environmental literacy graduation requirement when some students are struggling with core subjects, like reading and math?***

Research has shown that when integrated into the core curricula or used as an integrating theme across the curriculum, environmental education has a measurably positive impact not only on student achievement in science but also in reading, math, and social studies. Properly integrated environmental education requires students to use math, reading, science and writing skills as they pursue engaging activities. Moreover, outdoor activities increase student engagement and interest in science and in all core subjects.

In addition, environmental education provides students with critical tools to enter a 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. We must give the next generation a solid understanding of the complicated environmental problems they will face,

and the basic tools to overcome them and make informed choices in their own lives. Business leaders also increasingly believe that an environmentally literate workforce is critical to their long term success.

***Q. Professional development: Will it be available, who will receive it and who will provide it?***

Professional development would be necessary to ensure efficacy, but would be the same as in the introduction of new curriculum. Again, the recommendation is to accomplish environmental literacy utilizing existing curriculum and modifying teaching pedagogy and experiences. Professional development offerings would be at the discretion of the local school system based on its individual environmental literacy plan and adoption of that plan.

***Q. Assessment: How will students' environmental literacy, or a school's environmental literacy program, be assessed without a test or course?*** There will not be a test required to assess environmental literacy. It is worthy to note that only three of the current 21 credits for graduation require a test. Guidelines for the development and assessment of environmental literacy programs are being developed now.

***Q. Funding & Resources: Won't wealthier counties, or counties with established EE centers/programs have an advantage over small counties and those that do not have EE programs?***

An environmental literacy graduation requirement will not require school systems or counties to spend any additional funds for implementation. Guidelines are being developed to assist school systems in identifying appropriate environmental education resources within each school system, and suggest methods to improve their availability. The goal will be to ensure a flexible approach to environmental literacy program development that allows school systems to capitalize on their unique local resources and assets. There are also existing and potential public and non-profit sector funding opportunities for implementation of integrated environmental education programs and for the enhancement of related programs (i.e., STEM, Service Learning). Some examples include:

- [NOAA Chesapeake BWET program grants](#) support meaningful watershed experiences systemically in local school systems.
- [The Chesapeake Bay Trust Environmental Education Funding Opportunity](#) announced July, 2010 supports development and implementation of environmental literacy programs
- The proposed [No Child Left Inside legislation](#) provides for potential funding to train teachers to deliver high quality environmental education and utilize the local environment as an extension of the classroom; and for states to implement State Environmental Literacy Plans. Maryland's environmental literacy plan now positions it to potentially receive federal funding.