

Legislative Analysis



ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AWARD & GRANT

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Senate Bill 744 (Substitute H-2)

Sponsor: Sen. Patricia L. Birkholz

House Committee: Land Use and Environment

Senate Committee: Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs

First Analysis (3-29-04)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would create a teacher environmental and conservation honor (TEACH) award, and establish an environmental education grant program, administered by the Department of Environmental Quality.

FISCAL IMPACT: The bill would divert \$50,000 of annual revenue in the Environmental Education Fund to a new award program, for three years.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Population expansion, urban sprawl, and reliance on nonrenewable sources of energy have heightened interest in protecting and conserving land, water, and air. Many recognize education as one tool against further degradation of the environment. Michigan's K-12 curriculum framework includes a strand on ecosystems, where the objective is for students to learn how communities of living things interact, including how humans interact with the environment. Michigan students also learn about the environment in nature centers, visitors' centers, museums, camps, and zoos, and in youth organizations such as 4-H and Scouts. In order to promote environmental education, it has been suggested that a statewide award and grant program be established to recognize and reward outstanding environmental educators each year.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the Environmental Education portion of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act (Part 25) to require the creation of a 'Teacher Environmental and Conservation Honors' (TEACH) award, in order to recognize Michigan teachers who demonstrated teaching excellence in K-12 environmental education; and also, to establish a grant program through which \$5,000 grants would be awarded to eligible teachers to implement specific environmental education projects.

The coordinator of environmental education within the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) would be required to establish and administer the TEACH award, as well as an environmental education grant program that would award grants to eligible teachers to implement a specific environmental education project. For fiscal years ending September 30, 2004, 2005, and 2006, \$50,000 from the Environmental Education Fund would have to be used each year for the grants. [The fund consists of 25 percent of civil

finances collected annually under Part 31 (Water Resources Protection), Part 111 (Hazardous Waste Management) and Part 115 (Solid Waste Management), and is capped at \$150,000 per fiscal year.]

Nominations for awards would have to be submitted in a manner required to the coordinator. Any person could nominate an eligible teacher for a TEACH award, and under the bill “eligible teacher” would be defined to mean an individual who taught environmental education to K-12 aged youth in a public or private school, or through a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization.

The bill would require that the coordinator award grants on an annual basis. A grant application would provide a specific project proposal describing how the grant would be used. The maximum amount of a grant would be \$5,000, and a grant recipient would not be eligible to receive more than one grant each year. Environmental education projects in any of the following areas would have to be considered for grants: Great Lakes or water quality, land conservation, air quality; ecosystems; and, energy conservation and pollution prevention.

From among the TEACH award recipients, each year the coordinator would have to select one to be honored as the state’s “Environmental Education Teacher of the Year”. The coordinator would have to provide appropriate recognition to the recipient of the award. In administering the TEACH program, the coordinator would have to provide for an equitable distribution of TEACH awards given to teachers from all parts of the state, and an equitable distribution of grants to teachers from organizations and schools of varying sizes.

By October 31, 2005, the DEQ would have to submit a report to the legislature that evaluated the TEACH award and grant program. The report would have to specify all of the following: the name of each TEACH award recipient, and the school where he or she taught on the date the award was given; the amount of each grant awarded and how it was used; and the DEQ’s evaluation of the TEACH award and grant program, and whether they should be continued.

MCL 324.2505 et al.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ACTION:

The members of the House Land Use and Environment Committee reported out an H-2 version of Senate Bill 744. The H-2 version of the bill is different from the Senate-passed version of Senate Bill 744 in two ways:

First, the H-2 version de-couples the TEACH Award from the environmental education grant program, so that award winners and other educators would be eligible to apply for up to a \$5,000 grant;

Second, the H-2 version expands the kinds of environmental education projects that could be considered for grants. The Senate-passed version of the bill included 1) Great Lakes or water quality; 2) land conservation; and, 3) air quality. The H-2 version of the bill would retain these categories, and also add 4) ecosystems, and 5) energy conservation and pollution prevention.

FISCAL INFORMATION:

The bill would not increase or decrease revenue to the state, but would divert \$50,000 of annual revenue in the Environmental Education Fund to a new award program for three years. The Fund receives \$150,000 annually from selected civil fines and is used to operate a clearinghouse of environmental education materials and make them available to educators in the state.

ARGUMENTS:

For:

By providing teachers with funding to further environmental education, the bill could promote greater environmental literacy throughout the state. The bill also would advance professionalism among environmental educators by recognizing some of Michigan's excellent teachers. Environmental educators both in traditional K-12 classrooms and in nature centers, parks, and regional education centers can have a profound impact on how students see themselves in relationship to their environment, and should be rewarded. For example, educators at the Great Lakes Education Program, located in Wayne and Macomb Counties, teach fourth-grade students and their teachers about the unique features of the Great Lakes through classroom instruction and a field trip on Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River. After-school programs such as 4-H, Scouts, and Camp Fire Boys and Girls Clubs also offer many students a direct opportunity to learn about nature from enthusiastic, knowledgeable leaders. National programs such as Project Wild and Project Learning Tree employ educators who teach K-12 lessons on wildlife, air and water quality, land use, and other ecological topics to school children and their teachers. Whether working within a school or in another setting, environmental education is centered around a common goal: helping students become better stewards of the earth's natural resources.

Michigan has a rich history in environmental education, as it has been home to Liberty Hyde Bailey, a Grand Haven native and Michigan State University graduate who chaired President Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life in 1908, was dean of the agricultural college at Cornell University, and pioneered the field of "nature study". More recently, Michigan was home to William Stapp, a former Ann Arbor Public School teacher and University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources professor who is widely regarded as the founder of environmental education. Michigan's legacy underscores the importance of establishing a state-wide award program for outstanding environmental educators.

Response:

While the bill would honor teachers in public and private schools as well as those who educate through nonprofit organizations, it would limit the award to those who teach grades K-12. Many outstanding environmental educators work in colleges and universities. There, they are uniquely able to identify, instruct, and mentor students who have the potential to become outstanding educators themselves. The late William Stapp, for example, strongly influenced many students at the University of Michigan--and throughout the world--with his commitment to solving the root causes of environmental issues. In fact, Bill Stapp was the first chief of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Environmental Education Section, and was nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1993. Teachers such as he also should be eligible for the T.E.A.C.H. award and grant because they influence future generations of environmental educators.

POSITIONS:

The Department of Environmental Quality supports the bill. (3-24-04)

Legislative Analyst: J. Hunault

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.