

Environmental Education and Student Achievement

Environmental education has become a victim of the testing and accountability movement. According to *Curriculum Update*, the emphasis on test scores has pushed funding for environmental education out of many school budgets. Some critics such as Kevin Coyle, President of the US-based National Environmental Education and Training Foundation, believe that this is the wrong move at the wrong time. Says Coyle, "In almost every event when numbers have been correlated, students who take environmental education tend to test better in science, reading and social studies."

Part of the reason environmental education has a lack of champions is the perception among detractors that it is a form of unfocused values education, detached from core curriculum. Proponents counter that environmental education cuts across the curriculum and that studies of topics such as the impact of fossil fuel use touch on global warming, human health, urban planning, and Middle-East politics.

Teachers in environmental education find that it meets what is called "the high demand for relevance" experienced by many young people who feel that traditional curriculum has little connection with the real world as they see it.

A group of teachers in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania fastened on the idea

of getting students to study local environmental issues in order to inspire them to be more interested in traditional curriculum. The teachers developed a concept called *STREAMS*, standing for *Science Teams in Rural Environments for Aquatic Management Studies*. The program combined language arts instruction with math, science, and social studies under an environmental umbrella.

In the *STREAMS* program, language arts teachers coached students in writing persuasive essays about their environmental experiments. Math teachers showed them how to "crunch the numbers" relating to environmental stream degradation and social studies teachers tutored them in responsible citizen action.

The results were two-fold: an improvement in local environmental indicators and an improvement in test scores, meaning better communities and better students. Of the students participating in the *STREAMS* program, 71 per cent scored above the proficiency level in standard academic assessment tests. This was a significant margin over the norm.

Another program in Louisville, Kentucky showed that students who took environment-based programs enjoyed an attendance rate at school that averaged over 11 per cent higher than students outside the program.

Advocates for environmental education contend that rather than being an impediment to the greater goals of higher test results and attendance, environmental education may in fact be a means.

