



**House  
Legislative  
Analysis  
Section**

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**PROVIDE SCHOOL NATURE STUDY AREAS**

House Bill 4223 with committee amendment  
First Analysis (5-20-87)

Sponsor: Rep. Kay M. Hart  
Committee: Education

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**THE APPARENT PROBLEM:**

Some people fear that our school children are failing to receive the education that will enable them as adults to make decisions concerning the environmental and natural resources policies that are essential to the future well-being of our state and its citizens. Some private individuals, including parents and teachers, as well as organizations, have taken the initiative in attempting to provide school children with this component of what might be called civic education in its broadest sense. But their efforts are not systematically reinforced by the public school system, and whether or not even these efforts are made depends on the initiative and dedication of local individuals and groups. As admirable and as important as these individual local efforts are, more needs to be done. If nature study and land ethic education in the public schools cannot be mandated, at least they should be encouraged by legislative recognition of their importance.

**THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:**

The bill would amend the School Code to allow school districts to develop and maintain special areas for nature study and land ethic education. A nature study area would be used to make pupils aware of the interrelationship between human beings and the land and of the natural processes that occur upon the land. It would also serve as a model of how to combat such problems as soil erosion, the extinction of nonhuman species, the depletion of oil reserves, groundwater contamination, and air pollution.

A school district could use for a nature study area public school land, nearby public land, or, by contract, private land possessing natural history study value. Preferably, the area would measure at least one Gunter's Chain squared (about 1/10 of an acre). The area would have to include land in its natural state and could also include man-made ponds and native Michigan trees, shrubs, and wildflowers that had been planted to increase the biological diversity of nonhuman species in the school neighborhood.

A school district that intended to have a nature study area would have to encourage the involvement of pupils and the school community in the planning, planting, and general preparation of the site.

The Department of Education could provide consulting services to school districts creating nature study areas. Such services could be provided in cooperation with the natural resources and agriculture departments.

MCL 380.1171a

**FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:**

There is no fiscal information at present. It should be noted, however, that the bill in its present form does not require the state to do anything, although the Department of Education could provide consulting services and the natural resources and agriculture departments could assist as well.

**ARGUMENTS:**

**For:**

The bill would encourage school districts to develop nature study areas and to offer land ethic education programs that will involve students, teachers, and parents in learning about natural phenomena and processes, the interrelationship of humankind and nature, and the elements of land stewardship. While the bill is weaker than proponents of nature study areas would like, since it does not make it automatically a part of the curriculum and provides no funding, it will at least promote the concept and, perhaps, embolden schools to put more emphasis on natural resource studies throughout the curriculum.

In proposing standards for nature study areas, the bill makes use of an historically important measurement — the Gunter's chain, which is 66 feet long and which was the basis of all land measurement in early America (including the Jefferson Land Ordinance of 1785, the Northwest Territory Ordinance of 1787, under which Michigan was surveyed, and the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862). One tenth of an acre is one Gunter's chain squared, which means that nature study areas of this size would provide rich opportunities to teach about the historical and social uses of the land. This illustrates how the bill does not require the addition of yet another subject area to an already crowded curriculum. Rather, nature study areas can be used to teach virtually any subject area — mathematics, history, science, civics, social studies, etc. It would not detract from basic skills in mathematics and reading, but instead strengthen them through providing school children with an "outdoor classroom", which for many children will provide a useful (perhaps essential) addition to traditional "textbook" learning. Nature study areas would thus provide the opportunity for teachers to integrate all-too-often fragmented areas of study, and would also provide a site for teaching many concepts that cannot easily be taught in a classroom.

**For:**

Two other states, Wisconsin and Minnesota, currently have similar, though much stronger, state environmental education programs. The Minnesota State Board of Education has ordered environmental education classes in all state elementary schools, and the state's Department of Natural Resources has developed a curriculum with 80 lesson plans for grade school teachers. In 1983, Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction ruled that all teacher education candidates in science, social studies, agriculture, early childhood, and elementary education would have to achieve seven "competencies" in environmental education in order to graduate. Although the proposed Michigan bill is much weaker, since it is entirely permissive and does not mandate anything, it at least provides encouragement to school districts.

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***Against:***

The bill is unnecessary. Nothing now prevents schools from establishing nature study areas. In fact, some have done so. There is no requirement in the bill that schools develop these areas or emphasize nature study in the curriculum, nor is there any money for implementation. The state is not even obliged to provide consulting services in the current version of the bill. Thus, the legislation serves no useful purpose. It could in fact be harmful if it leads to the state imposing restrictions that interfere with voluntarily undertaken land ethic education efforts.

***Against:***

There are already too many demands on school curricula and budgets. The schools are constantly criticized for failing to pay sufficient attention to the "basics", meaning in great part reading and math skills. This bill represents yet another expectation that will put pressure on already overburdened local school districts.

***POSITIONS:***

The Department of Natural Resources supports the bill.  
(3-30-87)

The Michigan Association of School Boards supports the bill. (5-20-87)