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BILL ANALYSIS

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House Bill 4223 (as reported with amendments)

Sponsor: Representative Kay M. Hart

House Committee: Education

Senate Committee: Education and Mental Health

Date Completed: 10-7-87

RATIONALE

Some people fear that Michigan's school children are not receiving the education that will enable them as adults to make decisions concerning environmental and natural resources policies that are essential to the future well-being of the State and its citizens. As a result, some in the private sector, including parents, teachers, and civic organizations, have taken the initiative to provide school children in their local districts with the opportunity to study nature through the establishment of a nature study area at a local school. Their efforts, it has been argued, are not systematically reinforced by the public school system, and whether these efforts are made depends on the initiative and dedication of local individuals and groups. Some people believe that more needs to be done to provide for the study of nature and land ethic education in the public schools.

CONTENT

The bill would amend the School Code to:

- Allow a school district to develop and maintain one or more "nature study areas" within its boundaries for the study of nature and "land ethic education".
- Require the school district that intended to have a nature study area to involve pupils and the school community in the planning and incorporate land ethic education into the district's science and environmental education curriculum.
- Permit the Departments of Education, Natural Resources, and Agriculture to provide consulting services to a school district that established a "nature study area".
- Define "nature study area" and "land ethic education".

A nature study area would have to be:

- Designed to increase biological diversity among nonhuman species.
- Used to make pupils aware of the interrelationship between human beings and the land and of the natural processes that have occurred and will occur upon the land.
- Used as a model of how public school land could be managed to combat major threats to civilization, including, but not limited to, soil erosion, the extinction of nonhuman species, the depletion of oil reserves, groundwater contamination, and air pollution.

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

area and would be required to incorporate land ethic education into the existing science and environmental education curriculum of the school district.

The Department of Education could provide ongoing consulting services to districts that implemented the bill's provisions. These services could be provided in cooperation with the staff of the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Agriculture.

"Nature study area" would mean an area of public school land or nearby public land or contractually agreed upon use of private land possessing natural history study values. A preferred nature study area would measure not less than 400 square meters, approximately one-tenth acre, and would be located so as to be available for general use in nature study and the development of knowledge of natural processes otherwise known as land ethic education. A nature study area would have to include land in its natural state and could include man-made ponds and native Michigan trees, shrubs, and wildflowers planted to enhance the biological diversity of nonhuman species in the school neighborhood.

"Land ethic education" would mean education dealing with the relationship of pupils and others in the school community with nature through their nature study area.

Proposed MCL 380.1171a

SENATE COMMITTEE ACTION

The Senate Committee on Education and Mental Health adopted an amendment to House Bill 4223 to remove reference in the size of the nature study to the Gunter's Chain squared and replace that provision with the measurement of the nature study area in meters and acres. The Committee also added the provision requiring that land ethic education be incorporated into the existing science and environmental curriculum of a school district that intended to have a nature study area.

FISCAL IMPACT

The bill would have an indeterminate effect on State and local units of government. Costs to the Michigan Department of Education would depend on the number of local school districts which 1) chose to develop nature study areas, and 2) sought consulting services from the Department. The interim superintendent of public instruction has indicated that the Department does not currently have sufficient staff to provide such consulting services.

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Costs to a local school district would be determined by its decision whether or not to develop and maintain nature study areas. Establishment of nature study areas would not be mandated under this bill.

ARGUMENTS

Supporting Argument

The bill would encourage school districts to develop nature study areas and to offer land ethic education programs that would involve students, with the school community, in preparing the nature study area, and in learning about natural phenomena and processes, the interrelationship of humankind and nature, and the elements of land stewardship. The bill would provide students and the community with an opportunity to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of their natural resources.

Supporting Argument

Inclusion of nature study and land site development activities into the schools' science or environmental education curricula would provide students with hands-on experiences that would reinforce classroom teachings. Children develop an understanding of and respect for their environment which cannot be accomplished as effectively through a classroom-only approach. Appreciation of the environment gained through the child's efforts in planning, tilling, planting, and grooming, could develop a life-long concern for the environment.

Supporting Argument

Two other states, Wisconsin and Minnesota, currently have similar, though much stronger, state environmental education programs. The Minnesota State Board of Education has ordered that environmental education classes be part of the curricula 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 House Bill 4223 would be more permissive than the actions taken by these two Midwestern states, the bill at least would provide encouragement to Michigan school districts to institute land ethic education in their curricula.

Supporting Argument

Among the greatest sources of revenue to the State are those generated by recreation, tourism, and agriculture. Long-term economic stability for Michigan depends on the wise management of its natural resources, and the Legislature in the past has passed legislation that dealt with the environment. Encouraging the development of an outdoor study site for students to observe the balances in nature and encouraging a land ethic education could create an informed and responsible citizenry who will be responsible in the future for Michigan's precious resources.

Supporting Argument

The bill would be in direct keeping with the concepts and guidelines set forth in the State Environmental Education Plan. Communities should provide opportunities for environmental education experiences in order to develop a citizenry that is aware of and concerned about the environment and able to make sound decisions affecting the quality of their environment and life.

Response: Codifying the term "land ethic education" to describe a concept of environmental education would fragment the overall goals and objectives of the 1973 Michigan State Environmental Education Plan. Land ethics is one of many concepts of environmental education which is a multidisciplinary process involving all components of society.

Opposing Argument

The bill is not necessary. School districts now are not prevented from establishing nature study areas. In fact, some districts, such as Ann Arbor, already have done so.

Opposing Argument

The bill could be stronger by mandating that schools develop nature study areas or emphasize nature study in the classroom. In addition, there are no provisions for funding the implementation of the bill, and the State Department of Education, in cooperation with the Departments of Natural Resources and Agriculture, could provide consulting services but would not be required to do so.

Response: At least the bill would require that land ethic education be incorporated into existing science and environmental curriculum in the event a local district decided to develop and maintain a nature study area.

Opposing Argument

There already are too many demands on school curricula and budgets. The schools constantly are criticized for failing to pay sufficient attention to teaching basic skills, such as reading and mathematics. This bill represents another expectation that would place pressure on already overburdened local school districts.

Response: School districts that have developed nature study areas contend that these areas can be used to teach any subject area, such as mathematics, history, civics, science, and social studies. Thus, a nature study area could enhance the teaching of other subjects by providing school children with an "outdoor classroom", which would be a useful addition to traditional textbook learning. Nature study areas could provide teachers with the opportunity to integrate other areas of study and provide a site for teaching concepts that cannot be taught easily in the classroom.

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.