

Interview with Governor Edward G. Rendell

By: Jean M. Wallace, Governor's Environmental Education Advisory Council



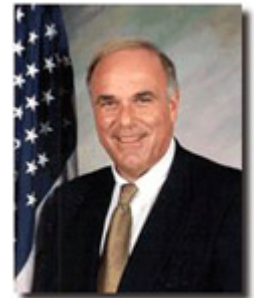
The following questions were posed to Governor Rendell inviting him to speak directly to the environmental education community about his position on EE. On behalf of the entire EE community, I am very grateful to the Governor's Office for taking time to respond to my questions and to allow me to share these responses with those who work hard to bring quality environmental education opportunities and resources to the citizens of Pennsylvania.

QUESTION #1

With the creation of the PA Academic Standards for Environment and Ecology, a course was set into motion that will finally move environmental education into mainstream education. In our work with schools, teachers and administrators, many have told us that without the standards in place, environment and ecology concepts would not be taught. Some teachers have commented that even with these standards in place that priorities are still given to other "tested" subject areas. Sadly, we all know that unless specific content is actually assessed in our PSSA tests, that many schools will forego teaching important concepts to students.

Q: Do you believe schools should be teaching our students about environment and ecology concepts and, if so, what is your administration doing to ensure concepts outlined in the PA Academic Standards for Environment and Ecology will remain a priority on PSSA standardized tests?

A: As Governor, I strongly support the inclusion of the Standards for Environment and Ecology (E&E) in the new PSSA test. Holding school districts accountable for standards-based classrooms is a priority of the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. With passage of E&E standards, the board placed responsibility and accountability on each of the 501 school districts.



The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has provided funding to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) for the past 21 years to ensure that these concepts are integrated into schools in the Commonwealth. DEP Secretary Kathleen A. McGinty has continued this partnership and through stakeholder input has identified and focused on the specific needs of educators. Further, DEP and PDE have worked together to ensure that the E&E Standards are included in formal kindergarten through 12th-grade school assessment (PSSA).

The DEP Environmental Education Grants Program offers three tracks and the majority of the funding source (5% of fines and penalties collected for pollution violations) to integrate the standards into formal curriculum, revise resource materials and support student field trips. Another track is designed to institutionalize environmental education in teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities.

With 501 school districts and 1.8 million students in Pennsylvania, the best way to ensure that environment and ecology are taught is to make sure it is an integral part of the new Science and Technology, Environment and Ecology PSSA test. The STEE test, mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind plan for 2008, is in the developmental stage within PDE. Assessment anchors are being developed for the test so school districts will know what is being tested. The current PSSA for reading and mathematics has a strong influence on the K-12 school district curriculum. Assessment anchors are developed in these two core areas and districts are making sure their curriculum covers these anchors.

The emphasis on reading and mathematics cannot rest with just teachers certified to instruct in these areas. It must become part of the curriculum as a whole. PDE has been working internally to develop professional development that looks at other curriculum areas adopting the reading and math assessment anchors in their classes. The E&E Standards lend themselves perfectly to many of the reading and math assessment anchors. Professional development done by PDE always looks at how multi-disciplinary lesson plans and units of study can be re-directed or created to meet many of the "No Child Left Behind" mandates and help districts meet the annual yearly progress on the PSSA.

QUESTION #2

One current obstacle facing environmental education in our state is the need to find the financial resources to fund the full inclusion of environmental education into our schools. In one recent conversation with Secretary McGinty she listed one of her top three priorities as "addressing the huge unmet needs in environmental education." Ninety-five percent (95%) of Pennsylvanians surveyed want environmental education taught in our schools. Although mandated by law, some legislators have told me that "we often mandate without adequately funding such mandates." During the 2006-07 school year students in all public and charter schools in Pennsylvania will be tested on specific content outlined in these standards.

Q: Given the "huge unmet needs" in environmental education, how well prepared do you think our students will be to take this PSSA test?

A: We know that we are at an important stage in terms of the support our teachers are getting in environment and ecology as well as science and technology. We also know that there are pressures that come to bear on teachers and administrators. We will continue to work to ensure that environmental education has a prominent place in K-12 education as well as higher education.

Many school districts have moved forward on their own and have made changes to their current curriculum to include the environment. We still have many districts that need help and support. This needed help and support is in the areas of financial and human resources. Teachers cannot teach what they do not understand, and professional development must continue to be a large concern for those in the environmental education field. All of the state's natural resource management agencies have provided resources to PDE's Office of Environment and Ecology, including books, hands-on activity guides for both state and national programs, and time and energy of their personnel.

The Governor's Institute for Environment and Ecology is the most sought after of all. It offers content, strategies, integration of subjects, field studies and multi-level assessments for the classroom teacher to use with students. More than 300 lesson plans and 30 units of study have been posted on the Department of Education's Office of Environment and Ecology Web site. Given the strong network of state agencies and education organizations there is good reason to believe that we can provide this support and the students will be well prepared.

QUESTION #3

In your written "Agenda for DEP" --- located at the following web address: <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/newsletter/?NewsletterArticleID=8904> --- you offer a list of necessary steps DEP will take to increase environmental protection. One of these steps states that DEP will "ensure greater engagement of citizens and other stakeholders in carrying out our priorities, including through effective environmental education initiatives."

Q: What are your criteria for an "effective" environmental education program/initiative?

A: The key to effective environmental education is to provide an awareness and understanding of ecology and human-driven processes, such as economics, energy production, agriculture, land use and more. With that in mind, we must go back to the network of resource agencies and organizations. Within the network, the following criteria should guide us:

- **Awareness:** Help students and the adult public acquire an awareness and sensitivity to our natural resources.
- **Knowledge:** Help students and the adult public gain a variety of experience in, and acquire a basic understanding of, the environment and its associated problems.
- **Stewardship:** Help students and the adult public acquire a set of values and sense of concern for the environment and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection, while ensuring economic growth and stability.
- **Skills:** Help students and the adult public develop the skills for identifying and solving environmental problems.
- **Participation:** Provide students and the public with an opportunity to be actively involved in working toward resolution of environmental problems.

QUESTION #4

Environment and Ecology is the new kid on the block. There is currently only one person charged with the duty and responsibility of seeing that all 501 of our school districts (1.8 million students) have the resources they need to effectively address Environment and Ecology standards. Much of the good work being done in the field of environmental education is through volunteer efforts, state agencies, or funded through short-term grants. Without long-range funding in place it is difficult to do long-range strategic planning to support effective environmental education.

Those of us in the field recognize that a good deal of work needs to be done with teachers and schools to bring them up to speed on what to teach and how to teach it. We have so many hard-working people in our state agencies that deliver quality environmental education, but we all recognize that money needs to be invested in the right places and for the right amount of time. Many legislators believe that a "line item" in the budget should be allocated to directly support environmental education through the Pennsylvania Department of Education so that strategic plans involving all of our state agencies can be put into place to help our schools meet state mandates.

Q: While Growing Greener II ensures that funding is available to support conservation and preservation efforts, there is nothing similar to support environmental education. Do you believe that when it comes to the environment, conservation, preservation and education go hand-in-hand? If so, what steps is your administration taking to see that "effective" environmental education receives the same level of support as conservation and preservation?

A: Our primary environmental education funding mechanisms are accomplished through the environmental education grant program and a memorandum of understanding between DEP and PDE that ensures quality programs. However, there are numerous other ancillary grant programs throughout the various state agencies that are designed to provide funding for environmental education projects. In addition, the departments of Environmental Protection, Education, Agriculture, and Conservation and Natural Resources, along with the Fish and Boat Commission and the Game Commission, all have environmental education programs to ensure students and teachers have access to environmental education programs. Growing Greener II, which was enacted July 13, 2005, enhances these programs by shoring up revenues and expanding key environmental programs in Pennsylvania. My administration will do everything in its power to sustain these initiatives and the very worthy efforts of environmental programs across the state. Finally, please note that the statement in the above question --- that there is only one person charged with the duty and responsibility to see that all school districts have the resources to address Environment and Ecology standards --- does not do justice to the full work of Pennsylvania Department of Education on this issue.

QUESTION #5

At present, some believe we are in a state of "environmental apathy" and that we lack a shared vision for what initiatives such as Growing Greener II can actually mean for our state. In a book titled "Eco-Economy," author Lester A. Brown writes: "Unless we have such a vision of where we want to go, we are not likely to get there."

Q: What is your vision for where Growing Greener II can take us as a state and what do you see as the major obstacles in getting us there?

A: Pennsylvania must more aggressively work to attract employers and workers to come here and stay here. In 2003, I pursued this goal with an integrated program of property tax cuts, school improvements and economic stimulus. In 2004, I continued to fight to make Pennsylvania more attractive by investing in improvements to quality of life with Growing Greener II. This initiative --- the single largest environmental investment in state history --- allows us to return brownfields and other polluted sites to productive use, protect farmland and open space from development, clean up polluted streams and abandoned mines, and improve state and community parks. The \$625 million in new funding allows us to continue these efforts and expand them to encompass new investment in community revitalization and promote the use of clean energy.

Quality of life matters so much because it affects the decisions people make. In an era when businesses and families can relocate across the country and around the world, location makes a big difference. Improving Pennsylvania's physical environment and enhancing its towns and cities will help attract new jobs and stem the flow of young families leaving the state. With Growing Greener II, we can reshape Pennsylvania, ensuring that our Commonwealth remains clean and growing.

QUESTION #6

As environmental educators, our mission is to promote and support effective environmental education activities and efforts throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Our main goal is to develop an environmentally literate citizenry who understands their impact upon our natural resources and is motivated to take positive steps towards resolving environmental issues. We are all very dedicated to this mission. And, it appears as though we have a good deal in common with your vision for moving toward a greater engagement of citizens in environmental initiatives.

Q: What can the entire environmental education community do to support your administration's vision for the future of environmental education in our state?

A: Pennsylvania's environmental education community has been an important partner in my administration's efforts to ensure the increased effectiveness of these programs in our state. Your leadership remains an important part of this endeavor. We know our environment can be a driver for economic growth. Assist when possible with the inclusion of environmental education into formal basic and higher education to spread this message.

All of us need to maintain and strengthen partnerships, open up dialogue and promote effective strategies. This means including diverse groups of stakeholders and implementing recommendations that meet their needs. Channel resources and efforts based on environmental and economic indicators to inform residents about the important, interconnected role of these two disciplines. Strive to develop a united front in your environmental education organizations while still including all partners and members in the process. I believe Pennsylvanians are an environmentally literate citizenry. They know firsthand that our Commonwealth is renowned for its natural beauty, environmental resources, and bounty of outdoor recreational opportunities that draw so many people to experience all that makes Penn's Woods so grand. And like all of you, they strive to preserve, protect and promote it.

Think holistically: Environmental education is a lifelong learning continuum concerned with the interrelationships among the natural and manmade world. Adult education is part of this continuum and, as such, we need to ensure that we have an informed public.

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