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Minnesota's 1990 Environmental Education Act

MARK A. DAVIS

The development of new technologies and effective environmental management by communities, states, and nations will not be enough to arrest and repair the environmental degradation that exists in the world today. Nor will technology and management alone be able to prevent significant environmental degradation in the future. Extensive pollution and other types of environmental degradation have occurred because societies have not sufficiently understood and valued their environments. The development of environmentally sound societies will require changed attitudes and a citizenry which is informed about the environment. Thus, it is essential that environmental education be a part of the long range environmental plan for any society.

The State of Minnesota has long been known for its beautiful forests, rivers, and ten thousand lakes. The state's identity, prosperous economy, and high quality of life for its four million citizens are dependent upon a healthy environment. As a result, the state government is keenly aware that current and threatened degradation of the state's environments cannot be tolerated. It has recognized and recently mandated that vigorous efforts to educate Minnesota citizens about the environment must begin immediately.

Earlier this year (1990), the legislature of the State of Minnesota enacted the Environmental Education Act. This Act established seven goals for the pupils and other citizens of Minnesota:

- To understand ecological systems;
- To understand the cause and effect relationship between humans and the environment;
- To be able to analyze, develop, and use problem-solving skills to understand the decision-making process for environmental issues;
- To be able to evaluate alternative responses to environmental issues before acting;
- To understand the potential complementary nature of multiple uses of the environment;
- To provide experiences to increase sensitivity and stewardship for the environment;
- To provide information needed to make informed decisions on environmental issues.

To implement these goals, the Environmental Education Act calls for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to environmental education by schools, state agencies, and individuals throughout the State of Minnesota. Among other things, the Act mandates the infusion of environmental education into the curriculum of *all* public elementary and

secondary schools. It also calls for the establishment of regional environmental resource centers throughout Minnesota, which will serve as sources of environmental information and programs for citizens and educators.

To coordinate and oversee environmental education efforts throughout the state, a new Office of Environmental Education has been created in the State Planning Agency. The Director of this new office will be assisted by a 17 member Advisory Board. This board will be made up of representatives from the State Planning Agency, the Department of Natural Resources, the Pollution Control Agency, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Education, The Board of Teaching, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Board of Water and Soil Resources, and the Extension Service. In addition, eight citizens, one from each of the eight congressional districts, will be appointed by the Governor. At least two of these eight citizens must be licensed elementary or secondary school teachers.

To ensure that environmental education initiatives will meet the needs of all Minnesota citizens—rural and urban, rich and poor, black and white, disabled and able, eleven regional advisory committees have been formed. These advisory committees include representatives from seven areas of environmental education: elementary educators (kindergarten-6th grade), secondary educators (6th-12th grades), post-secondary educators, educators who work at nature centers, educators working in local and county government agencies, educators working in state agencies, and other educators working with the public (such as librarians and educators of the disabled). These regional advisory groups, which were formed in October 1990, are responsible for acting as liaisons between the Office of Environmental Education and the citizens in their respective regions.

The development and implementation of environmental education in Minnesota as a result of the 1990 Act will be substantially decentralized. At the first statewide conference on environmental education held in October 1990 in Bloomington, Minnesota, participants argued that the goals, priorities, and objectives for environmental education should be set by the communities and environmental educators, not by the state government. Actually, the 1990 Act was drafted to ensure local and regional development of environmental education in Minnesota. The Act itself is quite brief and spells out only a few general goals. The primary task of identifying specific goals and objectives for different target groups in different regions of the state was left up to the citizens and environmental educators throughout the state.

At the October 1990 Environmental Conference, environmental educators began the process of identifying more specific goals and objectives. These goals and objectives

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included the following:

- all elementary and secondary educators will be required to develop competency in environmental education;
- educators will be provided the opportunity and incentives necessary to become competent in environmental education;
- all college and university graduates will be environmentally knowledgeable;
- all educational institutions will serve as environmental role models in such areas as recycling, energy usage, and water use;
- an environmental network will be established to facilitate ready communication between agencies, citizens, and the different environmental education providers;
- a stable source of funding for the Environmental Education Act will be established.

The 1990 Act did not provide for funding. On November 6, 1990, the citizens of Minnesota approved an amendment to the state constitution which authorizes 40 percent of the proceeds of the state's lottery to be dedicated to the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund until the year 2001. The new Office of Environmental Education and other new environmental education initiatives arising out of the 1990 Act are currently being funded through this Trust Fund. However, the Trust Fund was not created to provide continual funding, and thus the development of ongoing

funding for the Act continues to be a major concern. Ultimately, funding for state-wide environmental education will need to be incorporated into the state's annual budget. Since the state is currently experiencing a budget deficit, it is clear that other creative funding sources need to be developed as well, such as public-private partnerships involving business and industry.

The passage of the 1990 Environmental Act is certainly reason to celebrate; however, it is clear that environmental educators in Minnesota cannot become complacent. In fact, the very strengths of the Environmental Act also pose the greatest challenges. Although there may be great value in a statewide coordinated effort in environmental education, it remains to be seen whether all the different parties actually will be able to work together effectively. Another potential problem may involve getting the schools to adopt yet another important initiative. Educational institutions are already expected to address other important issues, including multi-culturalism, science education, internationalism, and drug awareness. How well will the educational systems incorporate yet another educational priority?

Minnesota environmental educators are committed to developing and implementing effective environmental education programs for all Minnesota residents. The 1990 Environmental Act provides the framework for this effort. It may also provide a model for other states and countries committed to increasing the level of environmental awareness and responsibility among their citizens.