

Let's Go Outside Specialty License Plate Event

June 10, 2015

Elizabeth Schmitz Talking Points

Thanks so much, Mrs. Beshear, for the introduction, and for your support of environmental education in Kentucky. I am so glad that Kentucky has had you in our leadership for the last eight years! Your passion for Kentucky's beautiful landscapes, your understanding of the importance of going outside to relax, play, and learn, and the way you have championed sustainability in schools is absolutely outstanding. Thanks again for all that you have done for Kentucky and for Kentuckians!

Thanks to our Education and Workforce Development Cabinet Secretary Tom Zawacki, for your help in large and small ways, in particular for helping us get here today for a license plate unveiling. I am so thankful to have a Cabinet Secretary who understands the relevance of environmental education in creating a real-world, project learning based approach to educational reform, and who also understands that children perform better in class when class goes outdoors from time to time. Thanks also to our cabinet's communication director, Cathy Lindsey, and budget director, Ryan Green, for their help and support of this agency, this initiative, and this event.

The Kentucky Environmental Education Council is a small state agency dedicated to ensuring a sustainable balance between the economy and the environment for future generations, and we could not do all that we do without the support of our leaders, including First Lady Beshear and Secretary Zawacki. In addition, we are governed by nine council members that represent industry, education, and the environment in equal parts, and a couple of them are here today. I would like to recognize our Council Chair of more than 20 years, Horace Brown; council woman

Karen Reagor, and council woman Lona Brewer. Our Council members volunteer their time to support and direct our work, and I would like to thank them for their dedicated service to the council and the Commonwealth. I know they are happy we have come to this point in our efforts to increase the sustainability of funding for environmental education in Kentucky. Donations from the license plate, once it goes into production, will help us reach our Environmental Education Master Plan Goal of integrating environmental education into the lifelong learning of Kentuckians, and in particular, will help fund at least two of our agency's primary programs.

Our professional environmental educator certification program (or PEEC) is dedicated to ensuring professionalism in the field of environmental education by teaching environmental educators best practices in environmental education, developed at the national level. Our program is currently undergoing review for accreditation by the North American Association for Environmental Education. The class is for teachers and what we call "Nonformal" environmental educators – those who may support teachers by providing workshops or offer lessons in classrooms, or those who work in parks, nature centers, zoos, aquariums, reaching out to school children and the general public. In addition to helping our Professional Environmental Educators understand how to educate rather than advocate, in addition to teaching them about how plan, evaluate, and connect their programs to state learning standards, in addition to teaching them how to accommodate different learning styles – our course offers something unique in the nation – we create a network of environmental educators who can learn from and help each other. This group of educators is all about taking kids outside, and connecting adults to their local environment. I would like to thank our Certification Advisory Committee members in attendance today, who guide development of the course, along with Toyota Motor Manufacturing of Kentucky and the Louisville Zoo, who together contributed over \$13,000 in grant and in-kind funding to support the course this year.

In my agency's recent survey of Kentuckians' Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors, we found that 96% of Kentuckians believe that environmental education should be taught in schools, and so one other program

that I am excited to tell you about is the Kentucky Green and Healthy Schools program.

With over 260 schools from over 70 counties enrolled, the program is dedicated to providing a structure and support for students and teachers to use school buildings and grounds as a learning laboratory, empowering them to make their school safer and healthier. Through the program, students have initiated school bus and passenger car idle reduction programs to reduce air pollution; launched energy conservation programs; built walking trails, gardens, and wetlands at their schools; hosted health fairs for their community; and much more. In fact, the program was honored by the US Green Building Council with the 2008 Excellence in Green Building Curriculum award. One teacher told me, "I just wouldn't have known how to help students explore these topics without the guidance of this program." Another teacher highlighted how her fourth grade students first launched their school garden through the program, and now use the garden to learn how to ask questions and investigate the answers, collect and analyze data, create graphs, and understand key science concepts, including food chains, food webs, water percolation rates based on soil type, seasonal changes and how the path of the sun in the sky changes over the course of a year. Along the way, their math, writing, and presentation skills are also improved.

Environmental Education also builds 21st Century learning skills like communication, problem solving, and teamwork. A middle school teacher told me that she saw an autistic student and Gifted and Talented student working side by side to help each other while building a wetland at their school. Many teachers share that they see students thrive in the outdoor classroom, and with the real-world context of environmental education – students that have never engaged in class before are often the first ones ready to get their hands in the dirt and help implement, investigate, and explore a topic when they are outside in a garden, wetland, creek, or field. While school gardens and wetlands make amazing outdoor classrooms, there is so much to be learned in even the humblest of situations. Parking lots can teach about rain fall, water flow, volume, and the water cycle; one tree provides opportunity to calculate diameter, volume, and estimate the height and number of leaves; a mowed grass playground leads to

exploration of different kinds of insects that live there. It doesn't have to be fancy, but if we can connect students to their outdoor environment they are more likely to engage in school – and to develop a sense of place.

In order for people to care about something, they have to know it first. Research has shown that for individuals to take personal action to conserve natural resources through actions like recycling, for folks to decide not to litter – they need to have a connection to where they are. Communities with less litter have less crime. Communities where people spend more time on their front stoops are communities where people get to know each other more. Communities that watch out for each other and for each other's children – these are the communities, and the days that many of us remember and long for. One way we can take back our communities, and reconnect with our sense of place, is to go outside!

Kentuckians have said in surveys that children not spending enough time outside is a major concern. One of our goals is to encourage children to embrace the outdoors and to teach them the importance of a clean environment for our health and preservation. Do you remember the freedom, creativity, and fun experienced in your childhood during outdoor play with friends and neighbors? Let's go back to our roots by encouraging today's children to have similar experiences and to gain the sense of community created by those shared memories.

And going outside, while especially important for the developing young minds and bodies of children, is also very important for all Kentuckians – research shows that time outside can improve mental health, memory, and physical health as well. This is an effort for all Kentuckians. Let's go outside, Kentucky!