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Kentucky Environmental Literacy Plan approved by Kentucky Board of Education

FRANKFORT, Ky. (Dec. 7, 2011) – The Kentucky Board of Education today approved the implementation of the Kentucky Environmental Literacy Plan (KELP) by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). The plan’s objective is to ensure that Kentucky students are educated about the environment when they graduate from high school.

The plan was developed by the KELP Task Force, which includes a diverse group of educators and other key stakeholders appointed by Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday. Environmental literacy is defined by the KELP Task Force as “the ability to recognize the components of healthy natural and man-made systems and the actions necessary to maintain, restore or improve them.”

Kentucky First Lady Jane Beshear applauded the approval of plan. “The Kentucky Environmental Literacy Plan uniquely promotes energy efficiency, sustainability and environmental preservation through valuable classroom learning,” said Mrs. Beshear. “Providing students with a strong foundation in environmental knowledge and practices today will benefit the overall environmental quality of the Commonwealth for future generations.”

Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet Secretary Joseph U. Meyer, said, “Innovative approaches are essential to helping Kentucky meet our goals of workforce development and college preparedness. Implementing this plan will help our students develop important collaboration, teamwork and problem-solving skills in the context of real world concerns that we face in Kentucky.”

Felicia Smith, KERP Task Force co-chair and associate commissioner for KDE, said that the plan will help students reach proficiency in all subject areas, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). “The Kentucky Environmental Literacy Plan is ambitious, but achievable as a means for reaching core competencies in STEM education and across the curriculum,” she said.

Research demonstrates that using the environment as a framework for study across academic disciplines, including math, language arts, science and social studies promotes academic achievement. In addition, this type of instruction positively impacts cognitive development, child health, workforce development and a healthy environment, said Kentucky Environmental Education Council (KEEC) Executive Director Elizabeth Schmitz. The agency is in the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet.

“Among other benefits, studies show that student motivation increases when environment-based education is incorporated into schools, as measured by increased attendance, decreased tardiness and fewer discipline referrals,” said Schmitz. “This occurs at the same time that standardized test scores improve, especially in language arts. The marked improvement in language arts shows the truly interdisciplinary nature of environmental education.”

Dr. Melinda Wilder, KERP Task Force co-chair and director of Natural Areas at Eastern Kentucky University, said, “Taking our students outside, for even 15 minutes, to write an essay about something that they can see and touch – for example, a tree – gives students experiences that help them include vivid, real life details in their descriptions. That same tree can be used to learn math – calculating the tree height, circumference, and board feet, for example. It can also be used to teach about scientific concepts, social studies and history.”

The KERP Task Force also was co-chaired by Billy Bennett, director of the Center for Environmental Education at EKV.

Development of KERP was funded by the Kentucky Environmental Education Council using America Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) money. The next phase of the KERP is to develop an Implementation Plan as directed by the Board of Education. This effort will be led by the KERP co-chairs and an Implementation Advisory Team named by Commissioner Holliday. The Implementation Plan will be completed in spring of 2012.

The Kentucky Environmental Literacy Plan can be viewed on the KEEC website at <http://www.keec.ky.gov>.