

Legislative Analysis



"GREEN" SCHOOLS

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House Bill 5554 as introduced

Sponsor: Rep. Joe Hune

Committee: Natural Resources, Great Lakes, Land Use, and Environment

First Analysis (3-20-06)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would create a Green Schools program to recognize schools that engage in a variety of environmentally-friendly activities.

FISCAL IMPACT: The bill would have no fiscal impact on the state or local governmental units

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

In testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources, Great Lakes, Land Use, and Environment, students from Hartland High School gave a presentation on several activities undertaken at the school concerning the environment and energy use. These activities, developed as part of an environmental science course, help educate the students on the benefits of environmental conservation, and provide them with a working laboratory in which they can experience first-hand what they are learning. Through the course, the students have developed a program to recycle old batteries, cell phones, and printer cartridges, and have encouraged students and faculty to conserve energy by turning off lights when a room isn't in use. The students also plan to conduct an audit of the school's energy use, and measure how their efforts have reduced energy consumption at the school. It has been suggested that a "green schools" program be developed to encourage schools to undertake similar activities.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend Part 25 (Environmental Education) of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act to create a program whereby the county or intermediate school district would designate schools that engage in certain environmentally-friendly activities as "green schools." The bill lists 20 possible activities, and schools would have to participate in at least half of those. Generally, these activities include recycling materials, improving energy efficiency, and education programs on plant and animal habitat.

MCL 324.2511

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Part 25 of NREPA requires the DEQ to appoint an individual to coordinate the environmental education activities of the department with the state Department of Education, local schools, broadcasters, and private sector groups to develop curricula,

special projects, and other activities to increase the understanding of the basic sciences, natural resources, and the environment. The coordinator also provides technical assistance to schools and educators undertaking projects related to, among other things, water quality, air quality, and habitat protection. Further information on the DEQ's environmental education program is available through the department's website at www.michigan.gov/deq. [Click on "Environmental Education" within the link to "Key Topics."]

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Creating a Green Schools program has two main benefits. First, the program would encourage schools to incorporate environmental education as part of the curriculum. As is evidenced by the activities of the Hartland schools, such a program enables students to learn through hands-on experience that extends beyond any textbook. This includes such activities as maintaining a garden consisting of plants native to Michigan, adopting an endangered species, hosting presentations by individuals with expertise in environmental or energy issues, and developing programs to improve energy efficiency at the school. Secondly, a green schools program encourages schools to recycle materials and improve energy use. This is particularly important as it has the potential to save the school district money, which can be used to hire or retain faculty or re-invested into the classroom.

Response:

Rather than requiring counties or intermediate school districts to designate schools as "green schools," the program should be incorporated into the existing environmental education activities of the Department of Environmental Quality. It has also been suggested that schools be required to participate in the Safe Route to Schools program administered by the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sport. That program, with funds available through the federal Department of Transportation, encourages children to walk and bicycle to school facilitates the development of projects that will improve safety and reduce traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution in the vicinity of schools.

POSITIONS:

A group of students from Hartland High School testified in support of the bill. (3-16-06)

The Michigan Environmental Council supports the bill. (3-16-06)

The Department of Education is neutral on the bill. (3-16-06)

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