



Dear Chair Koleszar and members of the House Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity today to testify on behalf of HB 4961. This significant piece of legislation will establish an environmental literacy task force that will work to develop a K-12 environmental literacy curriculum and complementary professional development opportunities for educators within the State of Michigan. Establishing this task force to encourage more environmental education opportunities for students in Michigan will support the students' current STEM based learnings in the classroom, deepen their understanding of the environment they live in and depend on, and create more outdoor learning opportunities that will enhance their health and well-being.

Prior to my current position at Michigan Environmental Council (MEC), I worked as an environmental educator at both a local and international level. Through this work, I found that there is a significant appetite for environmental literacy among students and public school educators. As an interdisciplinary study, environmental education provides opportunities for students to be curious and explore the interconnectedness of the ecological, economic, social, cultural, and political elements that exist between humans and the environment. It also helps to build on critical thinking skills and the concepts learned inside of the classroom by applying those concepts to real world situations that can take place outdoors.

By investigating complex environmental issues, educators can foster space for students to think outside the box and engage with one another on a deeper level. Environmental education supports the development of an inherent connection to the environment throughout a student's formative years. When you respect and care for something, you work to protect it. This is especially important in environmental justice communities where green space is often lacking and students are faced with a nature deficit. When used as a place-based learning modality, it creates a sense of pride and encourages future community leaders.

Before I joined MEC, I worked many seasons as an outdoor educator at a YMCA camp up north called Mystic Lake. I had the privilege of teaching 5th and 6th graders from schools in Lansing, Grand Rapids, and other cities across the state. Through this experience, I have seen firsthand the significant impact that a few days spent outdoors can have on youth development. This is especially true in our modern society where kids spend a lot of time indoors looking at screens. Getting kids outside and giving them a chance to face new challenges pushes them out of their

comfort zone, allowing them to build confidence, gain independence, and become more resilient humans.

Incorporating other aspects of environmental literacy into our education system is critical for preparing youth to grow into well-informed adults who are able to engage with the complex challenges facing our society. One of those issues that I work on daily is climate change. There is scientific consensus that our average global temperatures are warming and that human activities are causing these changes. But it's going to take collective action across the globe to work towards solutions and mitigate the worst impacts to our communities. In 2019, an NPR poll found that 86% of teachers and 80% of parents (66% of Republicans and 91% of Democrats) agree that climate change should be taught in schools. Teaching kids about the causes, challenges, and consequences of climate change can help them to feel less helpless in the face of this issue and inspire them to take action in their own communities.

Lastly, we agree that increasing environmental literacy will prepare students for 21st century jobs. Michigan is a state full of beautiful natural resources, which results in a wide variety of job opportunities available to the young people in our state. From land conservation, to water quality monitoring, to working in our state parks, there are so many different career possibilities to consider. Furthermore, clean energy is one of the fastest growing industries in our economy, with opportunities available in energy efficiency, solar development, and electric vehicles. A recent report from Clean Jobs Midwest, shows that Michigan added 5,400 new jobs last year, giving us a total of 123,983 Michiganders who currently work in the clean energy sector, making us the leader in the Midwest for clean energy jobs. Michigan is projected to create 167,000 additional clean energy jobs over the next decade. Providing further environmental education in our schools will be essential to preparing the next generation of our workforce with the background knowledge and skills needed to be successful in this emerging industry.

At Michigan Environmental Council, we believe that passing HB 4961 and embedding environmental literacy within the public education curriculum will only reap positive benefits for our youth, giving them the tools they need to create a sustainable and resilient environment for generations to come.

Thank you,

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