

Environmental Education: Turning Kids into Political Activists

by Steve Jackstadt and Michael Sanera

Twenty-five years after the first Earth Day, the environmental movement, as represented by established groups like Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society, is in trouble. Membership is down, their credibility with the public is in a shambles, and a majority in Congress seems bent on lifting the burden of environmental regulation.

There is one area, however, where environmentalists are on a roll and that is in education. Environmental education is one of the hottest educational issues in America today and throughout the nation, schools at all grade levels have jumped on the environmental education bandwagon. Currently, 30 states have laws mandating some form of environmental instruction in the classroom. Many of these laws require the integration of environmental education into most subject matter classes and at all grade levels. Thus, students are exposed to environmental education not only in science classes, but also in history, geography, health, and even in English and math classes.

Recently, however, environmental edu-

cation has become a cause for serious concern among parents, scholars, and journalists. In particular, critics charge that environmental education is dominated by a "doomsday approach" to environmental issues, which instills unfounded pessimism in children when it comes to the future, that environmental curriculum materials are biased and misleading, and that schools often encourage political advocacy that serves the goals of environmentalists. A graphic evaluation was given by Nancy Bray Cardozo in *Audubon* magazine; "As if children don't have enough to worry about these days—AIDS, wars, starving people—environmentalists are teaching them that their very planet is at risk. . . . Children feel like intruders in nature, destined to destroy their world."¹

Patricia Poore, editor of *Garbage*, reviewed a variety of environmental education materials and books and concluded that this material "contains oversimplification and myth, has little historical perspective, is oriented, and is strongly weighted toward a traditional environmentalist viewpoint, i.e., emphasizing limits to growth, distrust of technology, misinformation concerning waste management, and gloomy (if not doomsday) scenarios."²

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Biased Environmental Education Materials

A consistent pattern of one-sided presentations of environmental issues is shown by our review of nearly 100 sixth-through-tenth grade textbooks in the areas of science, health, geography, government, and history.

In the coverage of acid rain, for example, school textbooks, with rare exception, teach children that acid rain is a major crisis which is killing forests, fish, crops, and destroying buildings and statues. The text *Being Healthy* states: "Acid rain damages rivers and lakes, killing fish and plants."³ The D.C. Heath text *Earth Science: The Challenge of Discovery* states: "Trees all across the Northeast are dying."⁴

Nearly every text fails to mention the findings of the largest study of acid rain ever conducted. The National Acid Precipitation Assessment Project (NAPAP) was a ten-year study funded by Congress at a cost of over \$500 million. The NAPAP concluded that: "There is no evidence of widespread forest damage from current ambient levels (pH 4.0–5.0) of acidic deposition [acid rain] in the United States."⁵ The study's final report issued in 1990 also reported only minor harm to lakes and streams in the Northeastern United States.

In the textbooks, the tenuous global warming hypothesis is almost always covered as a fact. This hypothesis argues that the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide will bring about the melting of the polar ice caps and cause catastrophic flooding of coastal cities. One text even shows an illustration of the New York City skyline with a water-level covering the Statue of Liberty and most buildings.⁶ Rarely, if ever, do the texts provide equal time to the arguments of the scientists who have called this scenario into question.

Scientists who criticize the catastrophic global warming theory agree that over the last one hundred years the burning of fossil fuels which powers our industrial society has increased the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmo-

sphere. They also agree that there has been a slight (1 degree C [1.8 degree F]) temperature rise over the last one hundred years.⁷ The critics point out, however, that most of that temperature rise took place between 1880 and 1938 when the burning of fossil fuels was less than in the post-World War II era. Between 1938 and 1980 the temperature records show a slight decrease, with some warming since 1980. If there is a correlation between the rise of carbon dioxide and global warming, then warming should have accelerated after 1938, along with the rapid buildup of carbon dioxide, rather than lessened.⁸

Students are not presented with this important scientific controversy. Instead, they are shown pictures of beach houses falling into the sea and dust bowl farms and are told: "Scientists estimate that by the year 2040, the earth will have warmed by about 2 degrees C [3.6 degrees F]. And by the year 2100, people may be living on a planet that is 5 degrees C [9 degrees F] warmer than it is today."⁹ By leaving out the arguments of the global-warming critics, the textbooks are misleading and miseducating students.

Nowhere is the environmental education bias in the textbooks more comprehensive than in the area of the alleged world population crisis. With rare exception, the texts use a graph that shows the acceleration of population growth over the last 500 years. These graphs usually end at the year 2000. Often these graphs are accompanied by statements that the population will continue to double every 20 to 30 years and that food and other resources cannot keep up with population growth.¹⁰ These texts are misleading because they fail to tell children that since the 1960s the rate of population growth has declined. In the 1960s world population was growing at slightly over two percent per year. By the 1990s the rate had dropped to about 1.5 percent and it is expected to drop below one percent growth in the 2020s.¹¹ The graph that depicts this reality and the one that children should be shown is one which indicates a leveling off of world population at about 10 billion people around the year 2100.

Most texts go on to demonstrate the catastrophic effects of population growth by discussing dwindling food supplies and mass starvation, yet most of this information is either grossly exaggerated or simply untrue. Dennis Avery, a well-known population scholar, has documented the fact that world food supplies are growing faster than population and that most of the world's population has been eating better ever since World War II. He notes that "virtually all of the world's hunger in 1990 was 'political.'"¹² By this, he means that the pictures of starving people, mainly Africans, that are seen in children's textbooks are starving not because there is a shortage of food supplies, but because of civil wars where one side is using food as a weapon, or as the result of misguided policies of Marxist regimes. Avery goes on to note: "Africa is a vestige of the hunger problem which once faced all of the Third World—it is not a forerunner of impending famine for the Earth."¹³

The overall impression given to students by school textbooks is that of a world headed for ultimate destruction. If global warming does not incinerate us, or we don't starve, solar radiation pouring through the ozone hole will give us all skin cancer. Even if we survive these catastrophes, air and water pollution will make our day-to-day existence miserable.

Political Activism in the Classroom

After a biased presentation of environmental education information, students are often asked to join a "Children's Crusade" of political activism which supports the environmental interest-group agenda. This ranges from simply asking for more information from political leaders to the picketing of businesses and the holding of press conferences. Textbooks published by some of the nation's leading publishing companies, such as Prentice-Hall and Macmillan, lead the way.

The 1993 edition of the Prentice-Hall text *Environmental Science: The Way the World Works*, does not camouflage its desire for

kids to become active politically. The chapter on air pollution concludes with the section "Taking Stock—What You Can Do." After a discussion of air pollution regulations, the text tells students: "Write your Senators and Representatives." Children are told to ask that the next re-authorization of the Clean Air Act include requirements to "increase the average fuel efficiency of cars to 60 miles per gallon by the year 2000," to "set and enforce standards for ozone and other pollutants that will protect crops, forests, and all other aspects of the environment, not just human health." The text states: "Further delays are not tolerable."¹⁴ Absent is any discussion of research such as that by Robert Crandall and John Graham which concludes that higher fuel efficiency leads to the production of smaller cars that are less safe in accidents and thereby results in thousands of additional traffic fatalities.¹⁵

The Prentice-Hall text *Your Health* also urges students to engage in politics. At the conclusion of a chapter on the environmental dangers to their health the text states: "Given these problems, what can you do? Consider joining an environmental group. Boycott products. . . . Become politically involved. Urge your local, state, and federal representatives to take action against existing air, land, and water pollution and to act swiftly."¹⁶ (emphasis in original).

The Merrill (a Macmillan subsidiary) text *Focus on Life Science* is less direct in its attempts to activate students. In a section on the plight of the rain forests it states: "The Rainforest Action Network called for boycotts of fast-food companies that buy their beef from South American countries. . . . Do you think a boycott of fast-food companies would halt the destruction of rain forests? Would you be willing to participate in such a boycott? Give the reasons for your answers."¹⁷ Given the discussion of rain forest destruction which precedes this, most students will answer these questions in predictable ways.

The texts also send the message that government activity is the only way that environmental problems will be solved. The Glencoe (another Macmillan subsidiary)

text *Biology: An Everyday Experience* discusses the energy crisis in these terms. "The supply of fossil fuels is being used up at an alarming rate," the text warns. "Government must help save our fossil fuel supply by passing laws limiting their use."¹⁸ This text never mentions that market pricing is the most effective way to determine if shortages exist or that higher prices will stimulate conservation.

The behavior most often encouraged by textbooks and other environmental education materials is recycling. The pressure on children to recycle is enormous: schools engage in elaborate recycling programs and urge children to pressure their parents to recycle at home. Students are also urged to become politically active in support of government-imposed mandatory recycling in their communities. The D.C. Heath text *Earth Science: The Challenge of Discovery* includes a "Take Action" Section that asks students to: "Write to your State legislator and explain your position on mandatory recycling. Ask the legislator to explain his or her position on the issue. If your state does not have any recycling laws, ask if there are plans for new recycling legislation."¹⁹ Yet as an article in the *Wall Street Journal* pointed out recently,

There's just one problem. At least by any practical, short-term measure curbside recycling doesn't pay. It costs residents and local governments hundreds of millions of dollars more than can be recouped by selling the trash. It requires huge new fleets of collection trucks that add to traffic congestion and pollution.²⁰

Information on the costs of recycling has been well-aired in the scientific and popular literature, but does not find its way into textbooks.

Teaching Political Action Skills

Teaching political action to students is relatively new to the classroom and teachers are not always trained in political action techniques. To fill this void and to develop these political action skills, the texts offer

teachers help in the teachers' editions of the texts. The Glencoe text *Health: A Guide to Wellness* provides expert advice to teachers and students on "Writing to Elected Officials." This section provides six guidelines for writing to an elected official including: "Keep your letter short. . . . Limit your letter to one or two key issues. . . ." and "Ask for a specific response."²¹

While the textbooks are somewhat limited in what they can do to teach political action skills, special political action handbooks for teachers and students have been developed to provide detailed technical assistance. One of the most successful of these handbooks is Barbara Lewis' *The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action*. This 185-page political action handbook includes entries that provide expert advice on: "How to Write a Letter to the Editor . . . Tips for Successful Petitions . . . Six Ways to Fundraise . . . How to Write a News Release . . . Parading, Picketing and Protesting . . . How to Initiate or Change a Local Law . . . and Tips for Successful Lobbying . . ."²² This "soup to nuts" handbook provides all the political action skills the young environmental activist needs to push the environmental agenda.

State Environmental Education Laws

The political activism in the classrooms is the direct result of the environmental education movement's planning and hard work instituting state-level environmental education laws. A major objective of the environmental special interest groups which have supported the passage of these laws is to use environmental education as a way to create an army of young political activists. While each state's law contains slightly different language, most of them provide a statutory basis for teachers to encourage students to become involved politically in environmental issues.

The Council of State Governments, which provides model legislation to state legisla-

tors on many subjects, lists six characteristics for model environmental education legislation. One of these is "Motivation for Action—the commitment to act for a healthy environment based on one's knowledge and skills."²³

In Wisconsin, the state has established five priorities for receiving an Environmental Education Grant which provides money to develop curriculum and classroom materials. One of these priorities is "The preparation of citizens of any age to become active participants in the resolution of local-through-global environmental issues."²⁴

Washington state's Framework for Environmental Education asks teachers to "foster the idea that involvement in the political and legal process is paramount to resolving environmental issues."²⁵

In Arizona, one of the leaders in the environmental education movement, the state law passed in 1990 encouraged political activism by giving teachers the authority to "encourage civic and social responsibility toward environmental issues." This provision of the statute was used to justify students engaging in political activism. Fortunately in 1994, the state legislature struck this provision from the law and inserted the requirement that all environmental education must be based on sound science and economics.

Conclusion

There is nothing wrong with teaching students about environmental issues, but they should be taught the true scientific and economic complexity of these issues. There is nothing wrong with teaching children about the workings of the political system by getting them personally involved in political issues. What is wrong is to use biased and misleading information about environmental issues such as acid rain, global warming, and the so-called population crisis to recruit children as shock troops in a crusade to support a particular political agenda. Most educators would admit that this is not education. This has more in common with

political indoctrination and does not belong in our schools. □

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The Devastating Effect of the Annenberg Grants

by Gary Lamb

At a White House ceremony in December 1993, retired publisher and diplomat Walter Annenberg pledged \$500 million to public education over the next five years.

Three national organizations will share \$115 million of the grant, one of which is the newly founded Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, headed by TheodoreSizer. In addition, groups from the following four cities have secured \$50 million matching grants: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. In general, the grant money is intended to support school-based renewal within the public school system.

The focus of this article is not the possible effects the grant will have on public education but the very real effects such a gift has on private education.

Elementary and secondary private education in the United States depends almost exclusively on private-sector money: individuals, corporations, and foundations. The public school system, of course, virtually monopolizes the tax money used for the education of children. But over the last twenty years or so public school advocates have not been satisfied with the vast depth of the public coffers. They have become increasingly effective in securing additional

financial support directly from private sources.

One of the techniques they use to garner this additional support is to play up how bad public schools are and then continually remind the business community that most of the future work force is educated in these failing schools.

Just as the proponents of public education have zealously guarded public monies, they have now begun to view the private philanthropic dollar as their own. It has reached the point that if an individual or organization publicly announces a contribution of a few thousand dollars to a privately funded voucher program to enable low-income families to send their children to a private school, public school supporters cry foul. They consider it a bad precedent that should not be duplicated because such contributions divert money and attention away from public education, which desperately needs all the help it can get.

Assuming no increase in philanthropic giving, when the insatiable public education system begins winning private gift money for its purposes, it takes money away from an important source of support for private education.

The negative effect of Annenberg's grant on private education is not limited to the fact that he didn't award any of the \$500 million to private schools. The grants are matching grants. For example, in order to

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