

GREEN, EMERALD, AND EVERGREEN SCHOOLS

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Senate Bill 904 as passed by the Senate

Sponsor: Sen. Valde Garcia

House Committee: Great Lakes and Environment

Senate Committee: Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs

First Analysis (2-18-10)

BRIEF SUMMARY: The bill would amend Part 25 (Environmental Education) of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to revise the current section (MCL 324.2511) under which a public or private school may be designated as a "green school." The bill would revise current criteria and allow a school to earn one of three possible environmental stewardship designations — "green," "emerald," or "evergreen" — depending on the number of qualifying activities performed by the school or its students.

FISCAL IMPACT: Senate Bill 904 has no fiscal impact on the state or local school districts.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

A few years ago, the Legislature passed a law (Public Act 146 of 2006) to encourage public and private schools to start green school programs similar to one developed at Hartland High School. At that school, as part of an environmental science course, students began an initiative that included educational, recycling, and energy conservation efforts. As a result, the school has reportedly lowered its energy costs, and students have received hands-on experiences in recycling and conservation.

Under the 2006 legislation, a school must perform at least 10 of 20 specified activities aimed primarily at environmental protection and energy efficiency to be honored as a "green school." The program is coordinated statewide by Michigan Green Schools, a non-profit organization funded by corporate donations, and is coordinated at the county level by either a county employee, or, in most counties, an intermediate school district (ISD) employee. Most, but not all, counties have at least one school participating in the program.

Supporters say that the green school program is achieving its goals of providing educational benefits to students and cost-savings to participating schools, and is growing rapidly. In the current year, more than 500 schools are participating in the program, up from 18 schools in the first year. The bill's proponents seek to have the list of qualifying activities revised as provided in the bill, and for schools to be given credit for performing other worthwhile activities not specified on the list with the permission of the county coordinator. In addition, they suggest that adding two additional honors (an "emerald school" designation for schools performing 15 activities, and an "evergreen school" designation for schools doing 20 activities) will provide incentive for schools that are

already operating at the "green school" level to operate at an even higher level of environmental stewardship.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend Part 25 (Environmental Education) of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to revise the current section (MCL 324.2511) under which a public or private school may be designated as a "green school." The bill would revise current criteria and allow a school to earn one of three possible environmental stewardship designations — "green," "emerald," or "evergreen" — depending on the number of qualifying activities performed by the school or its students.

Current criteria. Under Part 25 of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act (Environmental Education), a public or private school may apply for and receive a "green school" designation if it meets at least 10 of the following 20 criteria: (1) the school recycles paper; (2) the school reuses magazines and newspapers; (3) the school has adopted an endangered species and posted a picture of it in a main traffic area; (4) the school media center regularly updates its ecological materials; (5) the school has instituted an energy savings program; (6) students participate in a planned program of energy savings, including dusting refrigerator coils, placing film on windows, lowering hot water settings, seeing how strategically-placed plants and trees can save energy, and checking the tires of buses and other school vehicles for proper inflation each month; (7) the school has hosted a visit by an ecological spokesperson, a Sierra Club representative, an endangered species show, or a similar presentation; (8) the school has a birdhouse habitat project; (9) the school has established a natural Michigan garden project with native plants; (10) the school has solar power presentations or experiments, such as a solar cookout; (11) classes do energy audits of their classrooms; (12) the school has a printer cartridge recycling program; (13) the school has a battery recycling program; (14) the school has a cell phone recycling program; (15) the school observes Earth Day in some way in April; (16) art classes have a poster contest to support ecology concerns and a schoolwide display in conjunction with its earth day activities; (17) the school has science class projects in which students do home energy improvements (such as turning down hot water heaters, installing home window insulation, cleaning refrigerator coils, and installing draft guards on doors); (18) the school has an ecology club, whose activities include helping senior citizens make their homes more energy efficient, putting in new furnace filters, caulking windows, cleaning refrigerator coils, and lowering water heater settings; (19) classes visit Internet sites where clicking saves rainforest habitat and teachers document the students' efforts; and (20) the school has set a goal of five percent less energy usage and works with local power utilities toward the goal.

New criteria and designations. The bill would replace the current criteria and provide for three possible environmental stewardship designations, depending on the number of activities performed by the school or its students: "Green school," for 10 activities; "emerald school," for 15 activities; "evergreen school," for 20 activities. In addition, the school or its students would have to perform at least two activities from each of four

categories (recycling, energy, environmental protection, and miscellaneous) to qualify for any of these designations.

Recycling. The recycling category would include the following activities:

- Coordinating a recycling program for at least two of the following: (1) office paper; (2) plastic water bottles; (3) metal cans; (4) printer cartridges; (5) newspapers and magazines; (6) computers and electronic waste; (7) batteries; (8) cell phones; (9) cardboard; (10); fabric and clothing; (11) CDs and DVDs; or (12) glass.
- Composting food and organic wastes.
- Conducting a waste-free lunch program.
- Implementing a policy to buy recycled, biodegradable, locally-produced, or less toxic food and school supplies.

Energy. The energy category would include the following activities:

- Offering at least one teaching unit on alternative energy.
- Using alternative energy, renewable fuels, or specialized energy-efficient technology in school operations.
- Implementing a school energy-saving program.
- Performing energy audits at student homes and educating student families and the community.
- Taking part in a project or event to promote improved vehicle fuel efficiency.
- Sponsoring an alternative energy presentation, project or event.

Environmental protection. The environmental protection category would include the following activities:

- Participating in activities promoting the health of the Great Lakes watershed.
- Offering a teaching unit on environmental issues facing Michigan.
- Establishing or maintaining a natural Michigan garden project with native plants.
- Establishing or maintaining an animal habitat project.
- Participating in a local community environmental issue by activities such as letter-writing, attending public hearings, raising funds, or community outreach.

Miscellaneous. The miscellaneous category would include the following activities.

- Adopting an endangered or threatened species and publicizing the activity.
- Establishing a student organization that participates in environmental activities.
- Observing Earth Day by participating in an Earth Day event in April.

- Maintaining an updated bulletin board or kiosk with information on environmental concerns and the school's actions in addressing those concerns.
- Establishing an eco-reading program.
- Updating the school's media center environmental materials.
- Visiting Internet sites that educate about the environment and support endangered ecosystems.

Other activities. In addition to activities described above, a school could design and propose another activity that would qualify toward a designation if approved by the appropriate county department or ISD by December 1 of the applicable school year.

Role of county or ISD. Currently, the county in which the school is located may designate either a county department or the intermediate school district (ISD) as the entity to accept and consider the approval of a school's application for a green school designation. The bill would clarify this language so that the county department or ISD would "accept, consider, and approve or reject an application." As noted above, the designated county department or ISD would also decide whether to approve an activity not mentioned in the bill as counting toward the number of activities needed for a designation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

More information about the green schools program is available on the Michigan Green Schools website: <http://www.michiangreenschools.org/>

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The activities required for a "green school" designation or harder-to-achieve "emerald" or "evergreen" designations can help schools save money on energy bills, create a culture of conservation within the school, educate students about energy and environmental issues, in part through hands-on experiences, and enable students to educate others in their communities, especially about energy conservation and recycling.

The green schools program has been successful thus far, expanding from 18 schools in the first year to over 500 in the current academic year. Adding "emerald" and "evergreen" levels may motivate schools already operating at the green level to do even more or for schools just entering the program to aim at higher goals.

In addition, the bill would allow a school the flexibility to count an activity not specified in the act toward a designation with the approval of its county coordinator.

Against:

Some people question the need for the program. Shouldn't schools be doing many of these things already, particularly steps that would lower their utility bills, even without this legislation?

Further, although committee testimony indicated that the \$20,000 annual budget for school flags and other expenses of the Michigan Green Schools non-profit organization are paid for by corporate donations, coordination and administration of the program requires time and effort by school, ISD, or county personnel at a time of budget shortfalls for many. Some people question whether this program makes the best use of the time of school, county, or ISD personnel.

Response:

These points go more to the question of whether the existing statute establishing the green school program is needed or worthwhile (or whether it should be repealed), rather than to the question of whether the existing program should be modified as provided in the bill. Assuming the program is going to be retained, the bill would revise the program in positive ways. Schools that do not approve of the program or that have no personnel or students willing or able to work on one are not required to participate.

POSITIONS:

Kris Moffett, a Hartland High School teacher and president of Michigan Green Schools, a non-profit organization, testified in support of the bill. (2-11-10)

Clean Water Action indicated support for the bill. (2-11-10)

The Livingston Education Service Agency, an intermediate school district, indicated support for the bill. (2-11-10)

The Sierra Club indicated support for the bill. (2-11-10)

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.