



# State Environmental Literacy Plans

## 2013 Status Report



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North American Association  
for Environmental Education

*Environmental education we need for the world we want*



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## INTRODUCTION



The Belgrade Charter, refined at the Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia in 1977, stated that:

Environmental education, properly understood, should constitute a comprehensive lifelong education, one responsive to changes in a rapidly changing world. It should prepare the individual for life through an understanding of the major problems of the contemporary world, and the provision of skills and attributes needed to play a productive role towards improving life and protecting the environment with due regard given to ethical values. (UNESCO, 1977, p.24)

### How can we create a healthier and more sustainable society?

In the past decade, we have seen dramatic changes in society—from the explosion of social media to increasing urbanization and changing demographics. We are also facing on-going challenges that demonstrate more than ever the interconnections among environmental issues, social issues, and economical issues, including loss of species, habitat degradation, water and air pollution, health epidemics, social injustices, and a changing climate. Solving these complex challenges requires an approach that allows us to understand different points of view, analyze problems, balance competing needs, and take informed action as an engaged citizenry.

Environmental education has been transforming how we make decisions and lead our lives for years. Environmental education is a process that helps people of all ages become proficient in learning new information and investigating issues—from natural to constructed settings, within our social networks and home communities and as an indicator and catalyst to economic sustainability. Environmental education informs, inspires, and enlightens.

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

—Albert Einstein

It builds human capacity, influences attitudes, and can lead to action. And most importantly, it can help people make informed decisions about the environment that lead to lifelong stewardship and a more sustainable society.

A number of challenges inhibit the integration of environmental education into schools across our nation. To meet the testing demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, for instance, many schools have had to limit the time they spend on environmental education, science, and other proven programs to invest more heavily in math and language arts. Other constraints include the lack of professional development opportunities, limited time and resources for field trips and outdoor investigations and overall cuts to education support in general.

In 2007, the No Child Left Inside® (NCLI) initiative was launched to advance integration of environmental education into schools across the United States.

The NCLI Coalition has attracted support from more than 2,000 business, health, youth, faith, recreational, environmental, and educational groups representing more than 50 million Americans. The Coalition's goal is to support legislation sponsored by Representative John Sarbanes of Maryland and Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island to ensure that every student achieves basic environmental literacy as part of their elementary and secondary educational career. The NCLI Act would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("No Child Left Behind") to include environmental education for the first time in U.S. history. The legislation would provide new funding for environmental education, particularly to develop rigorous standards, train teachers and to develop and implement state environmental literacy plans. NCLI also proposes giving states that develop environmental literacy plans access to additional funds.

### Environmental Literacy:

Someone who, both individually and together with others, makes informed decisions concerning the environment; is willing to act on these decisions to improve the well being of other individuals, societies, and global environment; and participates in civic life.

### ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY PLANS

State environmental literacy plans are comprehensive frameworks that support school systems in expanding and improving environmental education programs.

State environmental literacy plans:

- Ensure that environmental education activities are aligned with student graduation requirements and help achieve state education goals.
- Ensure that environmental education is fully, efficiently and appropriately integrated into formal education systems.
- Ensure that teacher professional development opportunities in environmental education are aligned with student achievement goals in environmental literacy.
- Ensure consistency, accuracy, and excellence in environmental content knowledge.
- Engage underserved communities through an inclusive process so that all stakeholders are beneficiaries of environmental education in schools.
- Ensure that nonformal environmental education providers, state natural resource agencies, community organizations, and other partners are involved appropriately and effectively in environmental education activities in schools.
- Serve as a necessary component of a comprehensive state environmental education program.



## ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY PLANS

States have assumed a number of different approaches in the development and implementation of environmental literacy plans.

However, as described in the No Child Left Inside Act, all plans must include:

- 1) Specific content standards, content areas, and courses or subjects where instruction will take place
- 2) A description of how state high school graduation requirements will ensure that graduates are environmentally literate
- 3) A description of programs for professional development of teachers to improve their environmental content knowledge, skill in teaching about environmental issues, and field-based pedagogical skills
- 4) A description of how the state education agency will measure the environmental literacy of students
- 5) A description of how the state education agency will implement the plan, including securing funding and other necessary support

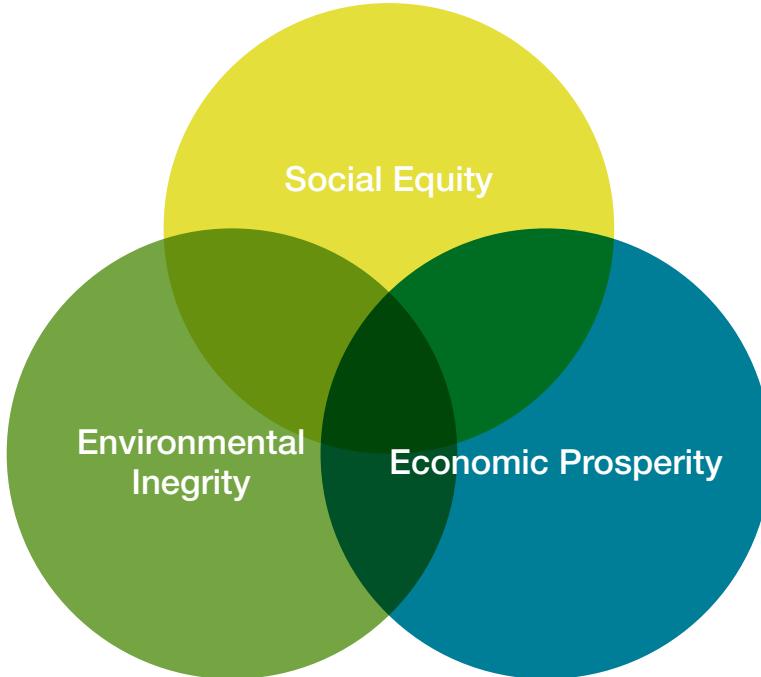


Fig. 1 One view of sustainable development (President's Council on Sustainable Development, 1995)

**The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) has been working to support states in the development and implementation of environmental literacy plans.** NAAEE developed national guidelines for PreK–12 environmental education, *Excellence in Environmental Education: Guidelines for Learning (PreK–12)*, that are being used by states to review existing content standards and as a starting point for the development of new environmental literacy learning strands.

The following report provides an update of the status of individual states' environmental literacy

plans as summarized by NAAEE staff between July 30th and December 5th, 2012. A total of 47 states, as well as the District of Columbia, completed online surveys or were interviewed over the phone to gather these results.

## SURVEY SUMMARY

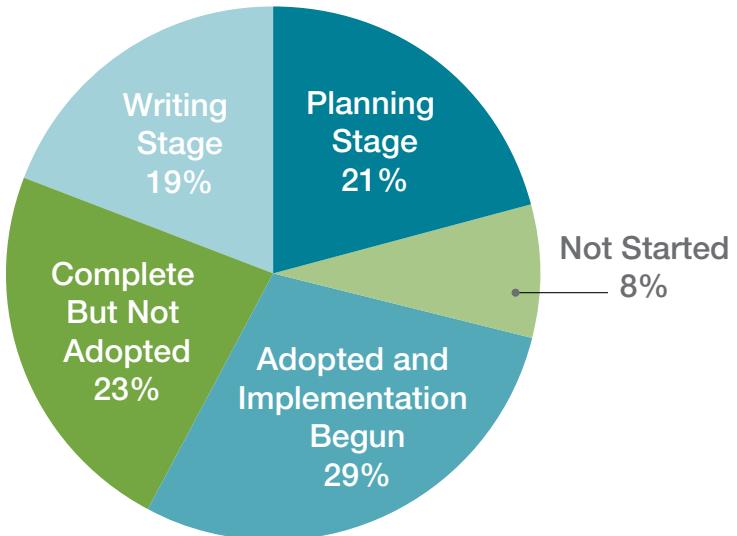


Fig.2 What is the current stage of your ELP?

**Forty-eight states (including the District of Columbia) were successfully surveyed** and/or interviewed about the development and implementation progress of their state ELP. At the time of survey completion the following were reported:

- 14 states have completed ELPs that have been adopted by state departments of education, state legislatures, governors and other decision-making entities
- 11 states have completed but not yet adopted ELPs
- 23 states are in the planning and writing phase of their ELP

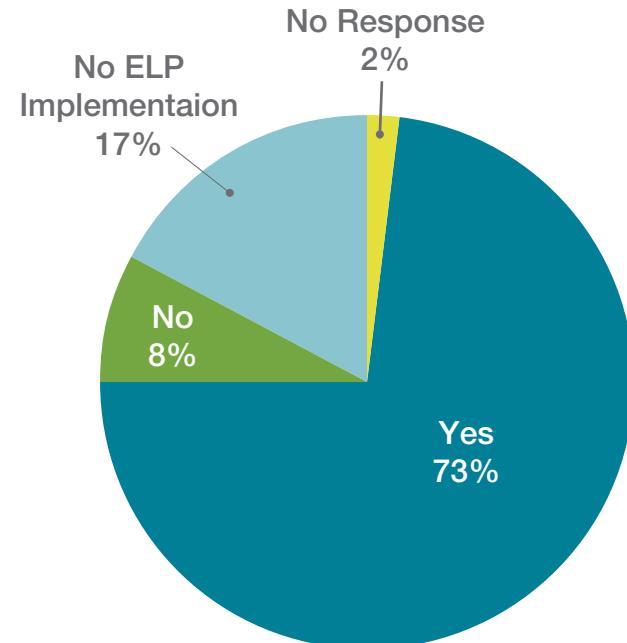


Fig.3 Is your state EE association (NAAEE Affiliate) playing an active role in ELP implementation?

The majority of states surveyed (73%) reported that their State EE Association is playing an active role in the development and implementation of their ELP. It's important to note that these associations are affiliated with NAAEE. An Affiliate of NAAEE is a state, territorial, provincial, or regional EE whose purpose is to promote and enhance environmental education. Affiliates are organizations in the field of environmental education that have chosen to affiliate with NAAEE and have been approved by the Affiliate Network Steering Committee. The Affiliate Network has grown to a membership of more than 50 organizations with tremendous potential to support NAAEE and further the field of environmental education.

## SURVEY SUMMARY

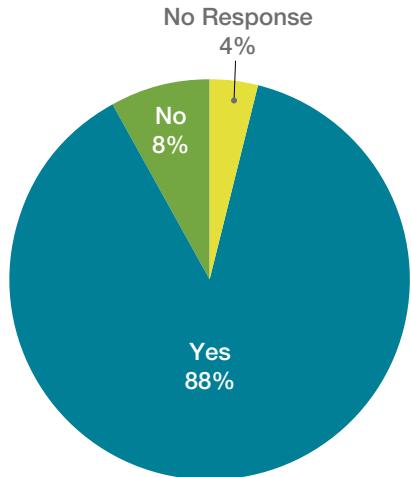


Fig.4 Is your state using NAAEE's "Developing a State Environmental Plan" publication as a reference?

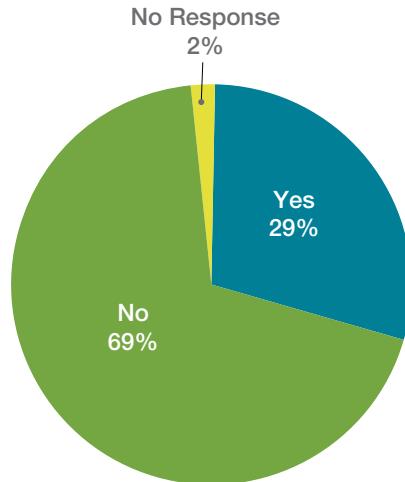


Fig.5 Is there an NCLI coalition for your state?

**NAAEE helps support the Affiliate Network in a number of ways, including providing valuable resources to assist states in the development of their ELPs.** Approximately 88% of survey respondents cited that they are using NAAEE's "Developing a State Environmental Plan" publication as a resource to write their ELP. Additionally, 79% of states surveyed reported participation in an NAAEE workshop on developing ELPs. Some states are using ELPs to build coalitions for environmental education in their state, which may be helpful in garnering support from state departments of education, a benefit experienced by 67% of survey respondents.

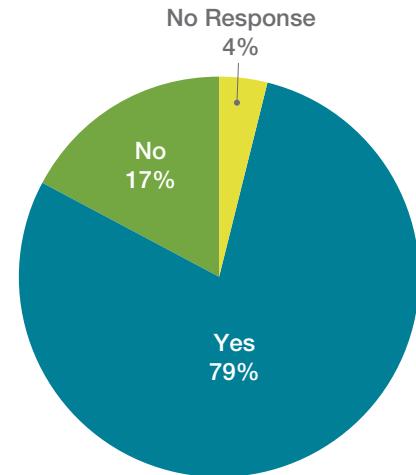


Fig.6 Has anyone on your ELP planning team participated in an NAAEE workshop on developing an ELP?

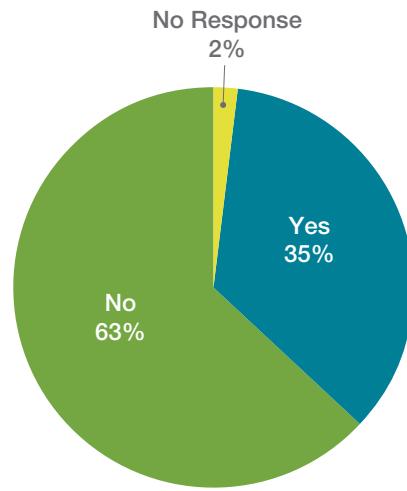


Fig.7 Is there an ELP coalition for your state, separate from your local EE association that is supporting the passage of the plan?

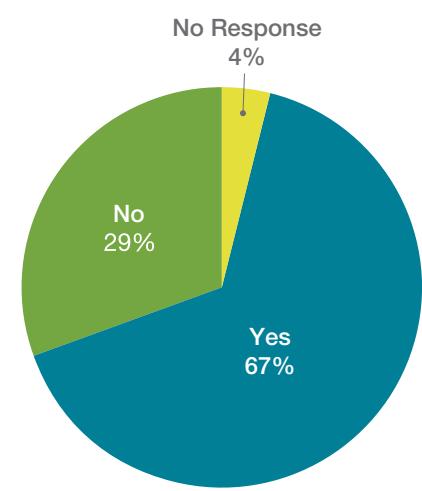


Fig.8 Is your state Department of Education supportive?



## SURVEY SUMMARY

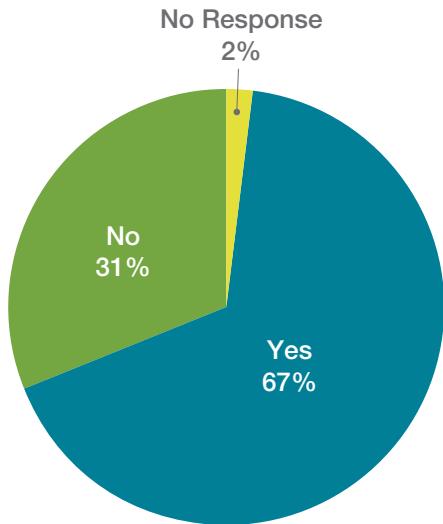


Fig.9 Does your organization have a timeline for anticipated major milestones in the development of an ELP for your state?

Most states (67%) have timelines established to track milestones in ELP development and implementation. These timelines may include fundraising plans and the passage of the NCLI Act. The good news is that many states are moving forward with the development and implementation of ELPs, without waiting for the passage of the NCLI Act. However, many are struggling to find the funding within their states to support their ELP. Only about 17% are waiting on the passage of the NCLI Act to move forward with ELP implementation.

EE programs have made such an impact within communities that 11 states have developed state EE Certification Programs. Schools and communities across the country are working together to design school gardens and service learning projects to benefit health, safety, human and environmental conditions. Schools and districts have added environmental literacy requirements to their high school graduation requirements, and an increasing number of students are benefitting from hands-on learning experiences while developing vital critical thinking skills that ensure their ability to make sound future decisions in an increasingly complex world.

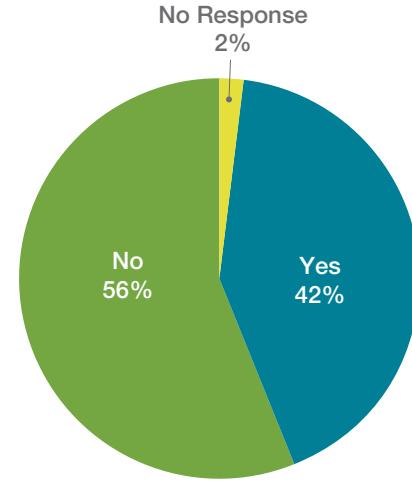


Fig.10 Do you have funding, either partial or full, to support your ELP?

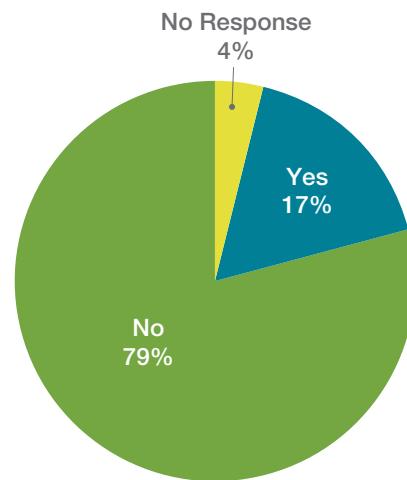


Fig.11 Is your state waiting for the passage of the NCLI Act to move forward with ELP implementation?

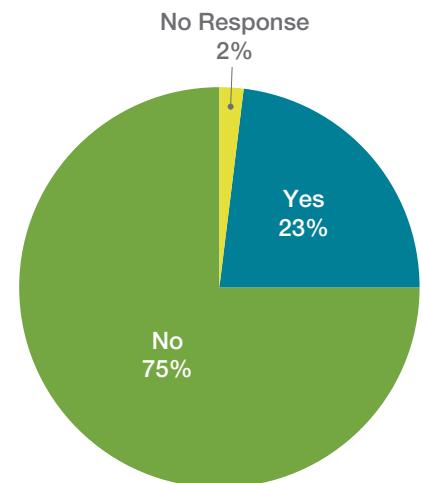


Fig.12 Does your state have a state EE Certification Program?



## NEXT STEPS



NAAEE has provided direct support to many states through workshops, publications, adoption strategies and by hosting monthly Action Network conference calls.

Action Network calls are coordinated by NAAEE's Advocacy Committee and create space for affiliates and other interested participants to join the conversation about ELPs and related efforts. The Action Network listserve reaches more than 500 individuals. Ongoing monthly calls give environmental education professionals the chance to share state successes and challenges with regard to ELPs. These timely updates from states are additionally shared through a monthly Affiliate Network e-newsletter.

NAAEE's Affiliate Network is the largest grassroots network of individuals and organizations working on ELPs. Together with the NCLI Coalition, this network represents an impressive number of people working together to increase environmental education in our schools.

Another essential partner in ELP development and implementation is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Ten of the states surveyed reported receiving funds from EPA to assist with state ELPs. EPA is currently reinvigorating a federal task force on environmental education that is acutely situated to offer strategic support to ELPs. With state ELPs gaining great traction, the task force has a terrific opportunity to move this process forward and fulfill its mission to protect human health and the environment for generations to come.



## NEXT STEPS

One of the most exciting trends in environmental education is linking schools, communities, and businesses to create change; ELPs offer a great opportunity to strengthen these partnerships.



Further analysis of the data presented in this survey will be conducted to determine more specific commonalities across state efforts. We know that states are engaging a number of partners in ELP development and that the local community plays an important role in ELP implementation. In many states, EE professionals already serve to connect schools and communities; ELPs may offer the glue to cement the relationships between schools and their surrounding communities. Understanding how to build fruitful partnerships between formal and nonformal education efforts is critical and already being highlighted through the development and implementation of ELPs. Identifying models, compiling case studies and documenting impact all present important opportunities to strengthen environmental education in states and help link formal and nonformal efforts. The assessment work is already underway through an NAAEE project “Developing a Framework for Assessing Environmental Literacy.” This framework was designed to help define what it means to be an environmentally literate citizen and provide ideas about assessing such literacy. States can use these assessment tools to determine the impact of their ELPs.



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## NEXT STEPS



Our future depends on our collective ability to apply an integrated approach to teaching and helping students understand the interrelated elements of sustainable environmental systems – from ecological, economical, and community perspectives. These systems are mutually dependent. The more we understand the interconnectedness of these systems and our personal connection and responsibility to the whole, the closer we'll get to living in the world that we want.



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