

SUBJECT: Creating the Texas Partnership for Children in Nature

COMMITTEE: Culture, Recreation, and Tourism — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Homer, D. Howard, Dukes, T. King, Kuempel, McCall, Thibaut
0 nays
2 absent — Kleinschmidt, Phillips

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 9 — 31-0, on Local and Uncontested Calendar

WITNESSES: For — Hayden Brooks, Central Texas Children in Nature Collaborative; Allen Cooper, National Wildlife Federation; Jaime Gonzalez, Katy Prairie Conservancy; John Hoelscher, SPJST Education and Nature Center; Art Pasley, C.A.S.T. for Kids Foundation; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Jay Arnold, Texas PTA; Carrie Kroll, Texas Pediatric Society; Jodie Smith, Partnership for a Healthy Texas: Conquering Obesity, Texans Care for Children)

Against — MerryLynn Gerstenschlager, Texas Eagle Forum

On — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Ashley Mathews, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department)

DIGEST: CSSB 205 would create the Texas Partnership for Children in Nature program. The partnership would be composed of seven members, including three public members and four ex-officio members. The governor would appoint the three public members in consultation with the executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and the education commissioner, including:

- one member representing parent-teacher organizations; and
- two representing a nonprofit organization dedicated to education concerning or protection of the environment.

The four ex-officio members would include:

- the executive director of TPWD;
- the commissioner of education;
- the commissioner of state health services; and
- the commissioner of agriculture

The public members would serve four-year terms, and appointments would be made so that various geographic areas of the state were represented. A public member would not be entitled to compensation but would be entitled to reimbursement for the travel expenses incurred while transacting partnership business. Initial terms of public members would expire February 1, 2013.

An ex-officio member could designate a representative to serve in the partnership in the member's place. The executive director of the Parks and Wildlife Department or the executive director's representative would serve as the presiding officer of the partnership.

The Parks and Wildlife Department would provide staff support to the partnership, in coordination with the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Department of State Health Services (DSHS), and the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA). However, Parks and Wildlife would not be required to reallocate staff or funding to the detriment of other programs.

The partnership would promote the well-being of Texas children by providing opportunities to spend more time outdoors and to learn about the environment through experiential activities and education about the environment. The partnership would develop and assist in the implementation of a plan to provide children with structured and unstructured opportunities for outdoor recreation, scientific study, and learning that included:

- development and implementation of strategies to support programs under which school grounds were converted into natural habitats for play and outdoor classrooms;
- establishment of trail systems that connected communities, parks, and schools to encourage walking, biking, and increased time outdoors by children and their families;
- establishment of nature play areas in communities;

- establishment of a statewide civic justice corps to provide students at risk of dropping out of school with opportunities to serve on conservation crews in state parks and on other public land;
- establishment of an outdoor classroom program on public land that would provide service learning opportunities and a voluntary programming aligned with required curriculum;
- increased access to naturalists at state parks and other public land to enhance discovery and enjoyment of the state's natural resources; and
- provision to minority children of increased access to state parks and other public land through partnership with appropriate organizations.

The partnership also would develop and assist in the implementation of a state environmental literacy plan. The bill would require the partnership to identify opportunities for and barriers to implementing environmental literacy programs in public schools and on public land, and to devise a method to measure baseline data concerning the amount of time children spend outdoors and any increased time children would spend outdoors as a result of the partnership's efforts.

No later than December 1 of each even-numbered year, the partnership would submit a report to the governor and various legislative leaders regarding the partnership's recommendations concerning its duties. The partnership could accept gifts and grants from a public or private source to use in performing its powers and duties.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2009, and appointments of public members would be made to the partnership as soon as practicable after that date. Unless continued in existence under the Texas Sunset Act, the partnership would be abolished and the chapter would expire September 1, 2021.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSSB 205 would promote the well-being of Texas children by providing them with opportunities to spend more time outdoors and to learn about the environment. A growing body of scientific literature indicates children who are outdoors regularly play more vigorously, play more cooperatively, and perform better in school.

Yet, studies show that the amount of time children spend outdoors has fallen by 50 percent over the last 20 years while the rate of obesity among

adolescents has tripled. Other public health implications associated with a sedentary indoor lifestyle have increased in children as well, such as medical conditions previously associated with adults, including Type 2 diabetes. The bill would improve the health and well-being of Texas children by bringing together state agencies and members of the public in a public-private partnership to build on existing programs and establish new ones in an effort to bring children into greater contact with nature.

The bill would provide for greater environmental sensitivity among children to ensure that they would be better prepared to deal with future environmental issues. By providing children with regular exposure to nature, the bill would not only improve the health of our children, now and in the future, but also would provide a better future for the state by preparing the leaders of tomorrow to make decisions regarding vital issues such as energy policy, land use, and water conservation. In addition, by establishing an environmental literacy plan, CSSB 205 would position the state to pull down federal funds from the "No Child Left Inside" program currently pending in Congress.

CSSB 205 would be permissive. Nothing would be required of public schools. Nevertheless, studies have shown that children who take part in experiential learning outdoors possess better knowledge of science and math. Therefore, the bill simply would bring together state agencies that already have existing voluntary programs addressing science and environmental literacy for children in order to coordinate efforts, making the services more available to schools as requested by educators.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

CSSB 205 could be used to indoctrinate Texas children with politically correct values espoused by environmental groups, such as the unproven theory that human activity is causing global warming. Over 650 scientists worldwide have debunked the theory that humans are causing global warming, yet the vague language of the bill could allow this type of "environmental sensitivity" to be presented to our children.

The bill simply is not necessary. There is no need for a law requiring schools to take children outside. Schools need to educate children, not take them to the park — that is a parent's job or something extracurricular organizations such as the Boy Scouts can provide.

Currently, 50 percent of incoming freshmen in Texas colleges require remediation or developmental courses in math, reading, or English. The

state should be addressing core academic needs in public education before adding requirements such as those in CSSB 205.

NOTES:

The committee substitute differs from the bill as passed by the Senate by providing that public members would serve a four-year term rather than a two-year term, and that the initial term would expire February 1, 2013 rather than February 1, 2011. It also would specify that the Parks and Wildlife Department would not be required to reallocate staff or funding to the detriment of other programs.