

**LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE  
BILL ANALYSIS**

**Bill No:** SB 274a

**49th Legislature, 1st Session, 2009**

**Short Title:** Continue Outdoor Classroom Program

**Sponsor(s):** Senators Cynthia Nava and Mary Jane M. García

**Analyst:** Eilani Gerstner

**Date:** March 6, 2009

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**AS AMENDED**

**The Senate Education Committee amendment changes language to appropriate the funds to the State Parks Division of the Energy, Minerals & Natural Resources Department (EMNRD), rather than to the Public Education Department (PED).**

**Original Bill Summary:**

SB 274 makes an appropriation from the General Fund to PED for expenditure in FY 10 to continue the Outdoor Classroom Program.

**Original Fiscal Impact:**

\$150,000 is appropriated to PED from the General Fund for expenditure in FY 10. Unexpended or unencumbered funds revert to the General Fund.

Since 2007, the Legislature has appropriated a total of \$466,000 for the Outdoor Classroom Program (\$400,000 to PED and \$66,000 to EMNRD) as follows:

- in 2007, a total of \$270,000 for FY 08: \$250,000 to PED and \$20,000 to EMNRD; and
- in 2008, a total of \$196,000 for FY 09: \$150,000 to PED and a total of \$46,000 to the State Parks Division, EMNRD:
  - \$26,000 for the Outdoor Classroom Program in general;
  - \$10,000 for the Outdoor Classroom Program for the Valley High School Cluster in Albuquerque Public Schools; and
  - \$10,000 for the Outdoor Classroom Program in Eddy County.

According to the State Parks Division analysis of SB 274, the division would expect to receive approximately \$125,000 of this appropriation under an existing Joint Powers Agreement between the division and PED.

Beginning with the 2005 New Mexico Personal Income Tax return, taxpayers have been able to donate a portion of their refund to the State Parks Division to fund Kids to Parks transportation grants for schools to participate in educational field trips outdoors. According to the State Parks Division, these donations provided approximately \$9,000 for transportation grants in FY 09.

## **Fiscal Issues:**

The State Parks Division reports that, of the \$400,000 total appropriated to PED from 2007 to 2008, a total of \$270,000 was transferred to the State Parks Division. However, the division notes that administrative and structural differences between the two departments, as well as budget adjustment request limitations, have significantly complicated the financial arrangement, causing unnecessary inefficiencies in program administration and delaying the expenditure of funds.

## **Issues:**

According to the State Parks Division,

- the Outdoor Classroom Program is a partnership between PED and the State Parks Division that aims to reconnect students to the natural and cultural heritage of New Mexico through standards-based curricula, and to support the academic, physical and mental health of students statewide;
- the Outdoor Classroom Program curricula (1) meet many state standards in science, mathematics, social studies, language arts, and visual arts; and (2) include activities in the classroom before and after each outdoor classroom field experience;
- the goal of PED and the State Parks Division is to integrate the Outdoor Classroom Program into the fabric of school learning – not to provide one-time field trips;
- since its inception in 2007, more than 10,000 students from 46 public school districts have participated in the Outdoor Classroom and over 100 teachers have been involved with curriculum development workshops and trainings;
- studies have shown that students who had structured outdoor learning experiences as part of their classroom study realized improved test scores, reduced disciplinary issues, better problem solving skills, and social growth; and
- since 2007, PED and the State Parks Division have worked together on five projects:
  - transportation grants: over 130 transportation grants have been awarded for school field trips to natural and historic sites statewide (some of these grants provided for multiple trips);
  - standards-based curricula review and training for teachers: as of January 2009, nearly 100 teachers had taken part in curriculum review and training workshops for Outdoor Classroom activities to ensure that OCP programming is tied to benchmarks and standards;
  - teacher curriculum training and workshops: teachers statewide have received supporting resources for their programs, such as training, kits, trunks, and other materials;
  - Service Learning programs: State Parks has supported four multi-year service learning programs, including such projects as watershed and wildlife monitoring, inventory, and habitat restoration; and
  - a program evaluation: State Parks and PED have been working with professional evaluation specialists to evaluate the Outdoor Classroom Program.

## **Background:**

The Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) has heard reports on the Outdoor Classroom Program since 2005. The 2007 staff report to the LESC in particular summarized available academic research regarding outdoor education programs, including research showing that:

- students who participate in outdoor education programs show:
  - improved knowledge and understanding of science concepts;
  - improved social and personal skills; and
  - English language learner (ELL) students experience specific benefits: compared to their non-ELL peers, ELL students show significantly larger gains in cooperation, leadership, relationship with peers, and motivation to learn;
  
- teachers and administrators report that students show improvements in:
  - mastery of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies;
  - critical thinking and problem-solving skills; and
  - interpersonal abilities; and
  
- teachers who participate in outdoor education programs report:
  - increased enthusiasm and commitment to teaching;
  - better working relationships with their colleagues; and
  - more opportunities to explore new subject matter and use innovative teaching techniques.

## **Related Bills:**

None as of 03-06-2009.