

Biennial environmental literacy summit brings together experts, decision-makers

Chesapeake Bay Program highlights need for diversity, equity and inclusion in environmental education programming



Environmental education experts, cabinet level representatives from state government and other decision-makers from throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed gathered at the [George Mason University Potomac Science Center](#) in Woodbridge, Virginia on Thursday to highlight challenges and explore possible solutions to ensuring environmental education resources and opportunities are distributed equitably among all students.

For only the third time, leaders from both state departments of natural resources and education came together to recognize the importance of working in a collaborative manner to advance environmental literacy throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Discussions throughout the day focused on the best way in which to foster partnerships to provide equity in environmental education, and share challenges and successes associated with providing diverse environmental education instruction to all ages and levels of students.

Pamela Northam, the First Lady of Virginia, served as the keynote speaker for the day. Other speakers included Tia Brumsted, deputy assistant superintendent for health and wellness with the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, Ben Grumbles, secretary of the environment for Maryland, Atif Qarni, secretary of education for the Commonwealth of Virginia, Dr. Karen Salmon, state superintendent of schools for Maryland and Dr. David Volkman, executive deputy secretary for the Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Representatives from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Chesapeake Bay Trust, Choose Clean Water Coalition, National Aquarium, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Chesapeake Bay Office, Potomac Environmental Research and Education Center, Potomac Valley Audubon Society and Virginia Resource Use Education Council shared their perspectives on using environmental literacy to address inequities in our education system and discussed strategies for how to overall increase diversity into the environmental movement.

Students representing schools from around the Chesapeake Bay watershed shared their own testimonials on the importance of Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs). A key component of environmental literacy programming, MWEEs connect standards-based classroom learning with outdoor field investigations to allow students to develop a deeper understanding of the natural environment.

The Chesapeake Bay Program, a regional partnership of federal, state and local governments, academic institutions and non-profit organizations, acknowledges that the restoration of the Bay depends on the individuals and communities living within the watershed, while its future rests in the hands of its youngest residents. In the [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement](#), the partnership committed to enable students throughout the Chesapeake region to graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to act responsibly in protecting and restoring their local watersheds, as well as increase the number and diversity of people who support and carry out conservation and restoration work.

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We Recommend:

- Blog: [Watershed leaders call for environmental education for all](#)
- ChesapeakeProgress: [Environmental Literacy](#)

In 2018, the Chesapeake Bay Program's [Principals' Staff Committee](#) committed to biennially convening high-level leaders in both education and the environment to discuss progress toward the partnership's environmental education goals. In August 2018, Chesapeake Executive Council Chair and Maryland Governor Larry Hogan [called on](#) his fellow watershed states to use the data and information collected by the Chesapeake Bay Program to develop strategies to equitably direct their resources toward ensuring all students have access to outdoor learning experiences and a sustainable school environment. Chesapeake Executive Council member, Governor Ralph Northam requested that Virginia host the 2019 summit.

Facts

Seventeen years after the Chesapeake Executive Council [formally recognized](#) the importance of environmental education, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, D.C., (jurisdictions) agreed to help their students graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to protect and restore their local watersheds. Since 2015, school districts within these jurisdictions have reported a slight [rise in their preparedness](#) to put environmental education programs in place, as well as an [increase in the number of schools](#) that are operating sustainably and a [steady level of curriculum-embedded opportunities](#) for students to learn outside.

The Chesapeake Bay Program uses its [Environmental Literacy Indicator Tool](#) to track partner progress toward their environmental education goals. This voluntary survey is distributed to school districts every two years. The 132 school districts in Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, D.C., that completed this survey serve 75 percent of the watershed's public-school students. In future years, collecting more survey responses from more school districts will give the Chesapeake Bay Program a more complete picture of environmental literacy in the watershed. The Chesapeake Bay Program will distribute its third environmental education survey to school districts in 2019.

Issues

When asked to name their highest priority for improving environmental education programs, respondents to the Chesapeake Bay Program's Environmental Literacy Indicator Tool survey agreed that funding, teacher training and professional development, and assistance integrating environmental topics into division curriculum topped the list. These findings have spurred the Chesapeake Bay Program to connect leaders in education with their natural resource counterparts and to share training materials and best practices across state lines. Continued progress will require stronger state commitments to the implementation of Student MWEEs and a wider base of funding to support environmental literacy. The shape of continued support from the Chesapeake Bay Program will be informed by input collected through future Environmental Literacy Indicator Tool surveys.

Importance

The Chesapeake Bay watershed is home to 2.7 million students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Through the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, D.C., have committed to helping their students graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to protect and restore their local watersheds. To do so, our partners are increasing opportunities for students to explore locally relevant environmental issues and practice environmental stewardship within their school communities, which boosts academic achievement and prepares students for life after school. By expanding the number of schools that reduce their impact on the natural world, our partners will benefit student health and allow them an active role in environmental protection. By teaching students to investigate and address environmental issues, our partners will nurture their sense of stewardship and encourage a lifetime of civic

engagement. By developing comprehensive policies and practices to support environmental education, our partners will ensure current and future students graduate with an understanding of their relationship with the environment around them.

Quotes

"NOAA is proud to lead the K-12 environmental literacy efforts of the Chesapeake Bay Program, working to ensure that every student in the watershed has the opportunity to participate in hands-on inquiries about their local environment. A key piece of our work is to understand and help remove barriers so all students - regardless of what neighborhood or zip code they live in - are able to participate."

— Sean Corson, Acting Director, NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office

"We have made significant strides in recent years getting students outside to spark wonder and ignite curiosity in the natural world, but we can do so much more. It is imperative that we are thoughtful and strategic in reaching every student no matter who they are or where they live. The Governor and I are hopeful for the future of the Bay thanks to these dedicated leaders from Virginia, and beyond, who have joined us today. We each have a powerful opportunity in our states to reach and inspire the stewards of tomorrow."

— Pamela Northam, First Lady, Commonwealth of Virginia

"As Marylanders, we heavily rely on our knowledge of the Chesapeake Bay and our surrounding environment to keep our state engaged in sustainable environmental practices. Ensuring all students have equal access to environmental education is the first step in passing along this knowledge to future generations and allows for a deep understanding of the effects our environment has on our daily lives."

- Dr. Karen Salmon, State Superintendent of Schools, State of Maryland

"At the National Aquarium, we work diligently to foster authentic and lasting involvement of our neighbors and core audiences in our conservation initiatives, developing and conducting our environmental education, community engagement and conservation programs through the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ). We sincerely value and appreciate the opportunity to be part of events and conversations like this one, through which we can create a safe, inclusive space to have an open dialogue about our processes, programs and initiatives, while re-envisioning what success looks like and ultimately, how we can get there together. If we are intentional and steadfast in our pursuit of equity and inclusion in conservation, opportunity is boundless and now is the time to act!"

- Curtis Bennett, Director of Equity and Community Engagement, National Aquarium

"Understanding the environment is every bit as important to a child's education as any other subject because it underpins life on planet earth, including our economy. To protect treasures like the Chesapeake Bay, we must teach people their connection to them as well as their true value and ensure that every child from every background has meaningful environmental education and experiences."

• Matthew J. Strickler, Secretary of Natural Resources, Commonwealth of Virginia

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"Experiential learning allows students to dig deeper on what they have already learned. Intentional, culturally relevant environmental education equips our youth to be critical and creative thinkers, excellent communicators, collaborators and community-minded citizens. We must work together to identify ways we can bridge the gaps and inequities in our environmental education programs throughout the Chesapeake Bay Region."

- Atif Qarni, Secretary of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia