

Think globally, teach locally

Place-based education remains important in era of standardization

By Josh Atwood

In the face of educational standardization required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Rhode Island is taking steps to keep our focus local. The act, signed into law by President Bush in 2001, requires schools to assess students annually in reading, mathematics and, starting next year, science.

The act has had an enormous impact on the way we educate, pushing teachers toward the use of standards that prepare students for these assessments. The controversial act will bring further changes to schools across the country in the fall of 2007 with the addition of a science assessment.

As we prepare to be compared with schools all across America, how can we keep the educational focus of science on the natural resources in Rhode Island?

The issue of "place-based" education is important, particularly when it comes to learning about the environment. Framing environmental education around local ecosystems gives students an opportunity to experience science firsthand merely by stepping outdoors. A 2003 study by researchers at Clemson University found that exposure to natural environments during childhood has a significant impact on environmental knowledge and behavior in adults. Here in Rhode Island, students are fortunate to have a natural learning environment in the form of our 400-plus miles of coastline.

While federally mandated assessments could be seen as homogenizing American science education, a partnership between the University of Rhode Island's Office of Marine Programs and the Roger Williams

University School of Education is making it easier to meet national goals while focusing on Rhode Island.

The partnership has created a program called Discovery of Rhode Island Coastal Environments, which is currently being piloted in the Newport school district. DOCE provides place-based professional development for educators and educational materials discussing Rhode Island's coast, and encourages fieldtrips to the coast. While the focus is very local, the program has been developed with standardized assessments in mind and is designed to meet regional educational goals (Grade Span Expectations) and the federal requirements of No Child Left Behind.

While the field trip component of DOCE represents an ideal in experiential education, many Rhode Island schools may still have trouble finding time or money for these excursions. To help students have a coastal experience, DOCE offers funds to cover the costs of transportation, no small commitment in a time of constrained school budgets. Currently this includes only the pilot district of Newport, but if DOCE's grant is renewed in the future, this opportunity may spread to other parts of the state.

For those schools that simply can't make it to the coast, DOCE plans to bring the coast to the students via the Internet. A newly revised and enhanced Web site will include an interactive atlas and will offer students a chance to explore a variety of Rhode Island coastal habitats through images and sounds. Sites for real and virtual field trips include Rhode Island's barrier beaches, rocky shores, salt marshes and salt ponds. Exploration via the Internet already has proven successful in

Rhode Island, as students from all over the state have been able to access video feeds from oceanographic explorations of URI professor Robert Ballard.

The state Department of Education has supported the development of DOCE, and the grants that currently fund the project come from federal No Child Left Behind money administered by the Governor's Board of Higher Education. These funds are designated for professional development activities. Unfortunately, federal funds for No Child Left Behind are notoriously hard to come by, and DOCE's grant expired on Dec. 31. Now Rhode Island will have to decide whether to renew its interest in place-based education.

As the nation moves toward educational standards and assessments, Rhode Island residents should recognize the value of the DOCE program and education based on local resources. Children growing up in the Ocean State should have the experience of exploring their coastal environments and learning about seaside plants and animals. If we value the coast as part of our culture and our identity as residents of the Ocean State, we should support experiential education through personal actions. Citizens can write to their elected officials to show interest in place-based programs like DOCE, volunteer in their school districts or join Parent-Teacher Organizations.

Education in America is changing rapidly, and we in Rhode Island have a unique opportunity to steer that change in a direction that meets national goals while preserving local values.

Josh Atwood is a fellow of the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island.