

Dear Governor O'Malley,

May 4, 2011

I am a GT Resource Teacher at Atholton Elementary in Howard County. We became a MD Green School in 2009, and we continue to maintain our green standards.

A unit I teach my fourth graders every year is called "Treasure the Chesapeake." The students learn about the issues surrounding the health and value of the Bay during this unit of study. The most meaningful connections they are able to make during their learning are most certainly made facilitated by the Bay Grasses in Classes program sponsored by DNR and supported by Chesapeake Bay Trust.

For the past four years, my students have cultivated wild celery seeds. They have planted, cared for and monitored their grasses in large tubs in our classroom. EVERY child, from 2nd grade through 5th, who walks into my room RUSHES over to the grasses daily, wondering how they are doing. This hands-on approach to environmental learning is, as you know, the key to encouraging stewards of this Earth. I see it happen very quickly during this unit, as the kids truly begin to understand the impact we have on our treasured, yet endangered, resource. This year we started a wiki page with our feeder middle school to compare growth, which brought in a new technology piece. The students loved having bay grass "pen pals," and I felt like we were doing some 21st century learning!

The most anticipated part of the program is definitely the final celebration, when we get in the water to plant our submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) in its natural ecosystem, promoting the health and biodiversity of the water.

Last week my fourth graders, along with our middle school wiki-partners, took the trip to plant our grasses - an experience the kids had been looking forward to since the unit began in January and one they will never forget. As always, they enjoyed seining (can you believe they pulled up a nice large-mouth bass?), water quality testing, and of course, planting the SAV. The wonderful staff at DNR led all these activities.

The sad part of our trip this year was that Mr. Lewindownski, DNR biologist, shared with me that this trip might have been our last. When I asked him why, he explained that funding has just been cut so far back at the Chesapeake Bay Trust, it may end up impossible to fund the program any longer. Two years ago we stopped having access to the materials, so all teachers in the program (and there are many throughout MD) made sure we kept our tubs, lamps, thermometers and such from breaking. This year the grant money we once applied for (and usually got) to fund the bus for the field trip was whittled away so far that schools were lucky to get half the bus paid for. Luckily our students had the funds to pay for the bus, but that is not the case in many of these schools. And those students probably need these experiences the most. I was also told there may not even be funding to pay the DNR folks who come out to teach the kids during the planting experience.

My heart was broken when I heard DNR might be forced to put an end to the Bay Grasses in Classes program. The kids' hearts were broken as well when they overheard this discussion. If this program were to end, I don't know what I would tell my future 4th grade students, as they anxiously await the day they get to learn about SAV and then go out to plant it.

We cannot afford to let these meaningful environmental experiences get away from us. This future generation NEEDS to be immersed in the value of caring for our waters and understanding the role they play in our watershed. PLEASE do what you can to ensure the Bay Grasses in Classes program can continue. Teaching won't be the same without this invaluable experience, and that meaningful real-world connection will be lost.

I admire your advocacy for environmental learning, Governor O'Malley, and I do support your leadership. Please support this program so our kids, and our waters, don't miss out.

Respectfully yours,  
Lisa M. Young