

Potential Value in Litter Education in Schools

Litter education in schools would help to address litter by changing the attitudes and behaviors that create the problem in the first place. These talking points attempt to address a couple of questions that have arisen about litter education in Louisiana schools: 1) Is litter education effective at reducing litter? 2) What is the likely impact that litter education would have on students?

Attitudes about littering include feelings skepticism about whether littering is truly a deviant behavior, if it seriously harmful to the environment, and whether it is worth mitigating. Littering behavior includes the actual acts of littering, the kinds of objects that are littered, and the circumstances that prompted the littering act to occur. Litter education has positive effects on changing student attitudes and behaviors toward littering because it instills a positive cultural value and norm for how we treat our environment. (Hartley et al., 2015, Oliver et al., 1985).

How litter education is delivered also matters. Litter education has traditionally been provided as “stand-alone” programming, often carried out by non-profit or governmental organizations. These litter education programs in schools can indeed help reduce waste and litter (Armstrong et al., 2004, Cutter-Mackinzie, 2010). However, greater results are seen in changes of attitudes and behavior when such programs become explicitly embedded instruction within the school itself (Ong and Sovacool, 2012). Littering is a behavior that is learned at a young age and once the behavior is adopted, it is difficult to influence it otherwise.

There is also an additional benefit of providing litter education to youth – and that is the changes that they can instill in their parents and family members. While plenty of anecdotal evidence exists that what becomes important to children becomes important to their parents, it is important to note that this claim is also supported by the literature (Knafo and Galansky, 2008, Damerell et al., 2013).

There is some concern that litter education will “take away” time teachers have from teaching core subjects. It is our position that such education compliments and enhances student learning experiences. For example, Louisiana’s current state science standards ask students to investigate and develop solutions to environmental problems. Litter is a relevant example of a problem that, unfortunately, nearly every student has experience with. Litter education also compliments the social studies disciplines of geography, civics, and economics. Indeed, there is ample evidence that performance in core subjects is enhanced when viewed through a local environmental lens (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998). Providing our students with an understanding of the environmental challenges we face will not only help them to become better problem-solvers of those unique issues, but it will also prepare them for many new career paths that have emerged in today’s world.

Litter education is needed because it is not explicitly embedded within the state standards, and we can’t assume that implicit education alone will instill the values we wish our students to have (Corrigan et al., 2007). However, litter education is not a “stand-alone” topic – in explicitly calling for litter education, we are creating an opportunity to embed this topic across academic disciplines.

Is litter education effective at reducing litter?

Yes. Litter education changes attitudes and behaviors towards littering. Explicit, embedded instruction is more effective than implicit instruction and instructional programming. Changes in attitudes and behaviors are not limited to the students receiving instruction, but are transferred to parents and peers.

What is the likely impact that litter education would have on students?

Current state standards do not explicitly call for litter education. However, many of these standards can be addressed by students and teachers through litter education. Performance in core subjects is enhanced when

those subjects are in local, environmental contexts. Furthermore, new state standards that emphasize cross-disciplinary approaches to problem solving are complimented by litter education.

Literature Cited

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