



RON TUSLER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 3rd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 18
Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation
May 6, 2025

Chairman Mursau and committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of Assembly Bill 18, a proposal to honor the federal "Every Kid Outdoors" pass at Wisconsin state parks.

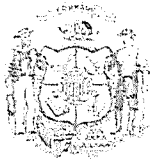
This bill is more than a gesture of goodwill—it's a forward-thinking investment in education and the future of Wisconsin's natural heritage. By allowing 4th graders and their families to use the federal pass at our state parks, we open the doors of opportunity to thousands of children who might otherwise never experience the beauty and benefits of outdoor recreation.

For many families, particularly those from lower-income households or urban communities, the cost of entry, even if modest, can be a barrier. This bill eliminates that obstacle for one critical year of a child's development. Studies consistently show that time spent in nature improves academic performance, mental health, and physical well-being. It fosters curiosity, resilience, and a connection to the land that textbooks alone cannot provide.

Fourth grade is a pivotal year in education, students begin learning about geography, ecosystems, and Wisconsin civics. What better way to reinforce those lessons than by giving them direct access to the very landscapes they read about? Wisconsin's state parks become living classrooms where history, science, and environmental stewardship come to life.

Other states have already adopted this model, and it's time we do the same. The infrastructure is already in place. The federal program handles registration. Wisconsin simply needs to say "yes" and welcome these kids and their families into our parks.

Thank you for hearing Assembly Bill 18. I ask for your support on this legislation.



ANDRÉ JACQUE

STATE SENATOR • 1ST SENATE DISTRICT

Phone: (608) 266-3512

Fax: (608) 282-3741

Sen.Jacque@legis.wi.gov

State Capitol • P.O. Box 7882

Madison, WI 53707-7882

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

Senator André Jacque

Assembly Bill 18

May 6, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and Members, for the opportunity to testify as the Senate co-author of Assembly Bill 18, Every Kid Outdoors in Wisconsin.

Every Kid Outdoors is a federal public lands youth initiative started by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 2015 to expand access for all 4th graders and their families to be able to experience the places that are home to our country's natural treasures and rich history.

The program gives 4th graders and their families 1 year of free access to national parks. Since the program was created, several states have begun to accept these passes at their state parks as a way to introduce new people to their state park system. Rep. Tusler and I are re-introducing last session's 2023 Senate Bill 18/Assembly Bill 30 to establish the same opportunity in Wisconsin.

Most 4th graders are already registered by their teachers for the national program, and sign up is also quick and easy through the program's website. Should Wisconsin choose to accept these passes at state parks, there would be no separate applications to handle.

This proposed policy change has been emphatically endorsed during past DNR and Wisconsin Conservation Congress spring hearings, garnering 92% in 2021 support, significantly more votes in favor than any other question put before all state residents.

According to previous DNR testimony, the bill could inspire many to purchase either an annual pass or future daily passes to continue to visit these properties, and would have minimal effects on administrative procedures, managing the change similar to Federal Ice Age Reserve properties where the National Park Pass is accepted. This legislation is also heartily endorsed by the Wisconsin Sierra Club and the Wisconsin Park and Recreation Association and passed standing committees in both legislative houses during the 2021-'22 legislative session with unanimous or broad bi-partisan support.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 18. I'd be happy to answer any questions.



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

2025 Assembly Bill 18

*Fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to pupils with
Every Kid Outdoors passes*
May 5, 2025

Good morning, Chair Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is Steve Schmelzer, and I am the Bureau Director overseeing the Wisconsin State Park System for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify for informational purposes on Assembly Bill 18 (AB 18), related to fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to 4th grade pupils with Every Kid Outdoor passes.

Allowing visitors to discover the natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities within our state by visiting a property within the State Park System can make a positive lifelong impact. Last year, the state park system saw over 20 million visitors across more than 100 properties. Allowing free admission for pupils with Every Kid Outdoors passes could inspire many to continue visiting our State Park System properties and to purchase either an annual admission pass or daily pass in the future.

Under AB 18, the department would waive admission fees needed to enter a State Park System property for fourth grade students with Every Kid Outdoors Passes issued by the National Park Service. Other fees such as overnight camping fees and shelter reservation fees would still apply. To implement this bill, the department would require that a vehicle present a valid Every Kid Outdoors pass issued to a 4th grade student present in the vehicle and the vehicle have Wisconsin registered license plates. They would then be able to receive a daily admission pass at no cost that would be valid for their vehicle on the day of the visit.

The department supports efforts to increase public access to the many outdoor recreation activities available in our state. It is important to keep the self-funded model of our State Park System in mind to ensure our continued ability to provide the best outdoor recreation experience for our visitors. There are currently several fee waiver programs offered by the State Park System. The Governor's 2025-27 executive budget also contains a provision similar to this proposed legislation.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



May 6, 2025

**Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Recreation
Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2025 AB18**

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) thanks Chair Mursau, Vice Chair Melotik and members of the committee for the opportunity to share testimony on AB18.

The DPI is in support of AB18.

DPI believes that each learner deserves access to meaningful and engaging experiences—both in and beyond the classroom. Outdoor spaces are critical extensions of the classroom and offer unique opportunities for academic learning, physical wellness, and social development. Supporting student access to our state's natural resources aligns with DPI's vision to prepare all learners to be knowledgeable, responsible, and engaged citizens.

Under current law, vehicle admission fees to state parks may limit a family's ability to access Wisconsin's public lands, even if the child qualifies for free admission under the federal Every Kid Outdoors program.

This bill helps remove that barrier by aligning state policy with an existing federal initiative. By waiving the annual state park vehicle admission fee for families of 4th grade students with a valid Every Kid Outdoors pass, this legislation would expand equitable access to outdoor learning and recreation opportunities across Wisconsin.

The Department of Public Instruction supports this bill and recognizes its potential to advance Wisconsin's educational priorities by increasing student access to meaningful outdoor learning experiences. Expanding opportunities for families to visit state parks—especially those who may face financial barriers—promotes educational equity and enhances student engagement with environmental learning. This vision aligns with the Wisconsin Children's Outdoor Heritage Resolution, adopted in 2016, which recognizes that every child should have the opportunity to play in the dirt, plant a tree, grow a garden, and explore and connect with the state's natural spaces and wild places.

The Wisconsin Standards for Environmental Literacy and Sustainability, adopted in 2018, provide educators with a framework for helping students understand the interdependence of ecological and human systems. These standards-based expectations are grounded in the belief that firsthand engagement with nature supports academic

learning, fosters curiosity, and builds critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Similarly, the federal Every Kid Outdoors program, administered by the National Park Service, provides free access to national parks for fourth-grade students and their families. This bill would align Wisconsin's state park policy with that federal initiative, reinforcing the value of outdoor experiences as an extension of classroom learning.

Beyond academic benefits, time spent in natural environments supports physical health, mental well-being, and social development. Outdoor learning promotes teamwork and cultivates environmental stewardship—outcomes that are deeply connected to Wisconsin's educational mission to prepare students to be responsible and engaged citizens.

Should this bill become law, DPI's Teaching and Learning Team is interested in partnering with the Department of Natural Resources to co-develop standards-aligned school activities and summer learning opportunities for families. These efforts would further strengthen the connection between environmental education policy and real-world learning.

By expanding access to state parks for fourth grade students and their families, the legislation directly supports DPI's commitment to equity and to providing all students with meaningful, real-world learning opportunities. We appreciate the Legislature's consideration of this bill and encourage its passage as a meaningful investment in both educational equity and environmental engagement.

Thank you for allowing DPI to share this testimony. Please direct any questions to Laura Adams, Policy Initiatives Advisor, at laura.adams@dpi.wi.gov.