



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Establishing the Outdoor School For All Program

2024

Authorizing Legislation: [RCW 28A.300.793](#) and [RCW 28A.300.795](#)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, the Washington State Legislature passed Second Substitute House Bill 2078 (SHB 2078) to establish the Outdoor Learning Grant Program. This initiative aims to enhance outdoor educational experiences for students in Washington public schools, particularly those historically underserved in science, thereby increasing equity and opportunity for students.

The legislation, codified in RCW 28A.300.793 and RCW 28A.300.795, created two grant programs and provided funding to support 5th and 6th-grade outdoor school overnight experiences, as well as related experiences for high school counselors. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) administers the entire program, allocating grants to eligible schools, school districts, and educational service districts. Additionally, the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) administers a second grant program for outdoor learning programs hosted by federally recognized tribes, agencies, and community-based organizations. The third program, managed by Outdoor Schools Washington (OSWA), reimburses schools for outdoor school expenses, including program fees and transportation.

The anticipated benefits of the Outdoor Learning Grant Program include higher graduation rates, improved school behaviors, higher academic achievement, enhanced critical thinking skills, practical experience with science concepts, development of leadership and collaboration skills, and deeper engagement with learning, place, and community. The bill emphasizes the importance of community partnerships to ensure the success and sustainability of these programs, aiming for equitable geographic distribution and high accessibility for students receiving special education services.

By passing this bill, the Washington State Legislature has shown its commitment to enhancing educational experiences through outdoor learning, recognizing the potential benefits for students' academic and personal growth. Integrating outdoor learning into the curriculum promotes academic excellence through place-based learning, nurtures essential life skills, fosters environmental stewardship, and opens doors to potential career paths.

With an initial allocation of \$10,000,000 in the first year and \$20,000,000 in the subsequent two years, the Outdoor Learning Grant Program represents a significant investment in the holistic development of Washington state's students. The program aims to foster a connection with nature, enhance educational outcomes, and contribute to the overall well-being and future success of its participants. Sustained funding is crucial to ensure continuous and reliable student support, maintain and expand beneficial programs, and support comprehensive program evaluation to inform future funding decisions.

BACKGROUND

Created in 2022, the Outdoor Learning Grant Program (OLGP) develops and supports outdoor experiential education for Washington's public school students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. These programs provide outdoor education opportunities across the state, supporting science education, the John McCoy (Iulilaš) Since Time Immemorial curriculum implementation, and social-emotional learning. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has partnered with Outdoor Schools Washington (OSWA) of the Washington School Principals Education Foundation, and the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) to administer elements of this funding initiative.

By integrating outdoor learning into the curriculum, schools promote academic excellence while nurturing essential life skills, environmental stewardship, and potential career paths. These programs reduce barriers to outdoor education, ensuring that all students, especially those historically underserved, have access to enriching outdoor experiences. Research indicates that outdoor learning benefits all students, with the greatest impact on those who are underserved, a phenomenon known as the equigenic¹ effect. Partnering with schools, federally recognized tribes, and outdoor education providers plays a crucial role in enhancing outdoor learning in underserved communities. Their involvement brings diverse expertise and resources, ensuring that programs are culturally relevant and inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

The Outdoor Learning Grant Program (OLGP) has significantly advanced outdoor educational experiences, particularly for historically underserved students in Washington state. In an era where the average student spends far more time on a screen than outdoors, students are now connecting with their communities and local habitats in new and meaningful ways, enriching understanding of both Indigenous and Western perspectives on the natural world. Teachers are re-inspired by engaging in community-led initiatives and culturally responsive opportunities. OLGP has fostered a collaborative environment among general and special education teachers, ensuring high participation from students receiving special education services.

"I really don't remember the last time I felt that happy"
-High School Student at Outdoor School

The funding has transformed participation in overnight programs, serving more than half of the 5th or 6th grade statewide cohort this school year. These efforts have enhanced academic learning and promoted holistic well-being and environmental awareness among students. The positive feedback

¹ <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/the-equigenic-effect-how-nature-access-can-level-the-playing-field-for-children/>

from students and teachers underscores the project’s success in making science education accessible, engaging, and impactful.

YEARLY PROGRESS

Year 1

The Outdoor Learning Grant Program funds three programs: Outdoor Learning Grants (OLG) for Schools and Districts at OSPI, OLG for tribes and community-based organizations at the Recreation and Conservation Office, and Overnight Outdoor Educational Experiences (OOEE) through Washington State Principal’s Education Foundation’s “Outdoor Schools Washington” (OSWA).

In the 2022–23 school year, OSPI OLG were funded for \$1.95 million and RCO OLG for \$1.85 million. The Overnight Outdoor Educational Experiences (OOEE) through Washington State Principal’s Education Foundation Outdoor Schools Washington was funded for \$15.9 million. For all three programs, demand outstripped funding available. A total of 71,706 students were served this first school year and there is great potential for growth.

Year 2

For the 2023–25 biennium, OSPI OLG were again funded at \$1.95 million and RCO OLG for \$1.85 million. The Overnight Outdoor Educational Experiences (OOEE) through OSWA was funded for \$15.9 million. For all three programs, demand exceeded available funding. A total of 98,070 students engaged in these activities with great potential of increased engagement.

See Figure 1 below for a full breakdown of engagement by program, and numbers of district, schools, and students represented by program.

Figure 1: Summary of Outcomes

Initiative and Year	Number of Students	Number of Schools	Number of School Districts
OLG-RCO			
2022–23	22,039	174	52
2023–24	19,404	251	79
OLG-OSPI			
2022–23	26,187	179	63
2023–24	31,016	206	79
OOEE-OSWA			
2022–23	23,549	308	99
2023–24	47,650	652	171
TOTALS	169,845	1,770	543

Source: OSPI, RCO, and OSWA grant reports

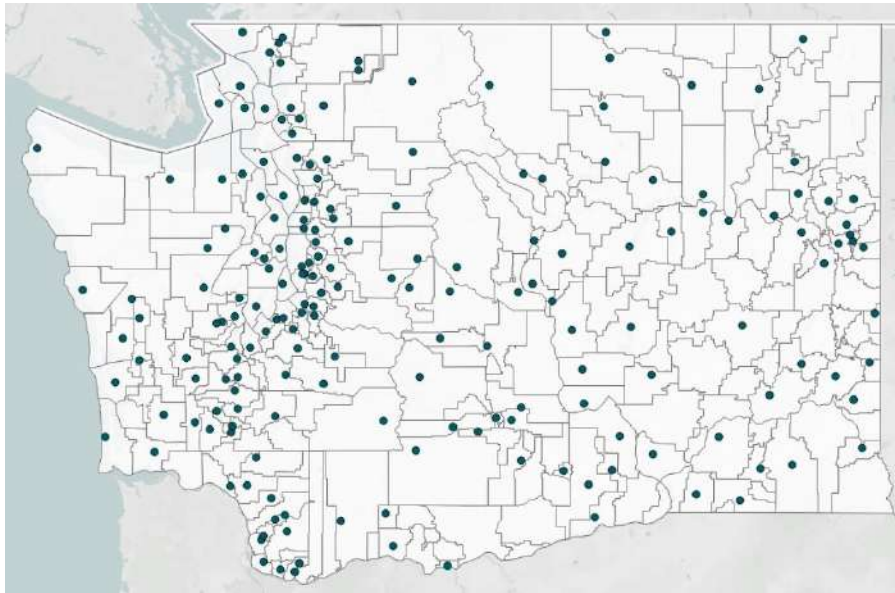
IMPLEMENTATION

The OLGP legislation prioritizes student populations that are underserved in science, specifically prioritizing:

- schools identified for improvement
- tribal schools and communities
- rural and remote schools
- alternative learning environments
- low-income students
- migrant students
- students of color
- emergent multilingual learners, and
- students receiving special education services.

Research shows that outdoor learning benefits all students, and students underserved in science benefit the most. This is known as the equigenic effect. To most effectively reach these students, OSPI created a Targeted Equitable Funding Tool (Appendix A). By using the Washington State Report Card data², two versions of the tool are available that rank order schools or school districts by priority for each of the targeted audiences. Those priorities are also mapped with where the funding for each aspect of the OLGP went. Figure 2, below, shows the results of this initial analysis by mapping which school districts have received any funding. Other maps and tables are available that show which school districts are our highest targets for funding, and how much funding each school district has received. OSPI, RCO, and OSWA are utilizing this type of feedback to continually refine their outreach priorities and funding mechanisms.

Figure 2: Outdoor Learning Grant Program Funding Map Summary



² <https://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/>

For the RCO and OSPI grant programs, eligible grantees serve pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade experiential youth outdoor education program activities learning in, for, and about the outdoors. The grant programs are locally informed, place-based, and address communities' needs, a key to long-term success in our local-control state model of education.

For OSPI's Outdoor Learning Grants, successful applicants are from rural, tribal, or alternative schools, and/or be a school or district at or above the statewide level for one or more of the prioritized student audiences. Each application is reviewed to determine if it addresses state learning standards, and engages students in real-world, hands-on science learning within a reasonable budget. If applicants meet these criteria, funds are awarded until all funding is expended. Requests for funding continued for months after funding was fully allocated in years 1 and 2.

As the field of outdoor learning grows, the need for ongoing professional development is clear. OSPI partners with Regional Science Coordinators in each Educational Service District to host a series of professional learning events for nonformal and informal science educators from community organizations and teachers implementing outdoor learning. OSPI fosters regional communities of practice, utilizing local projects as exemplars to highlight the best practices in outdoor learning, including:

- updated learning standards
- culturally responsive education practices
- engaging with tribal communities through food sovereignty and natural resources management
- place-based and project-based learning through integrated curriculum, such as habitat restoration projects
- considerations for working with students with disabilities

OSPI works to ensure each student in Washington receives outdoor learning opportunities aligned with state learning standards and environmental education best practices, rooted in local phenomena.

For RCO's Outdoor Learning Grants, eligible applicants included federally recognized tribes, outdoor education providers, local governments (cities, towns, counties, port districts, park and recreation districts, etc.), nonprofit organizations (501(c)3, 501(c)1, or 501(c)4 tax-exempt organizations), or state agencies. The grant application process was highly competitive, with only 44 of 183 applications funded over two years. Each application was evaluated by a diverse and knowledgeable panel of reviewers. Funding prioritized tribal schools and communities, rural and remote schools, alternative learning environments, low-income students, migrant students, students of color, emergent multilingual learners, and students receiving special education services.

To ensure continued fidelity of OLGP implementation and nurture a statewide community of practice, RCO hosts an annual Outdoor Learning Successful Grantee Workshop. Participants engage in meaningful learning and reflection led by fellow grantees as exemplars and OSPI experts to experience:

- tribal sovereignty and working in partnership with tribes
- social-emotional learning standards applied to outdoor learning
- science learning through environmental and sustainability education standards
- developing and leading program evaluation for continuous program improvement

The third and largest program contracted through OSPI with OSWA aims to support outdoor school experiences for each and every student in Washington state. Through this funding, OSWA reimburses schools for their outdoor school planning and implementation expenses based on need as described in HB2078. Schools are matched with outdoor school sites, based on the desired outcomes districts have for their students, travel time, and cultural considerations. OSWA serves as a clearinghouse of information in site details, lessons, information for parents, publications on outdoor learning, and pro-outdoor school literature. OSWA leverages the power of involving high school leaders as mentors to younger students at outdoor schools. Outdoor Schools Washington connects to their scope and sequence for high school mentor training, a guide to recruiting, selecting, training, and supporting mentors from local high schools.

OSWA reduces barriers to attending outdoor school by subsidizing expenses. Their funding expands existing programs, and jump-starts schools who have never been to outdoor school. OSWA holds two week-long Outdoor School trainings annually to build a community of practice statewide. These week-long trainings focused on all aspects of outdoor school, (safety, meal routines, games, cabin etiquette, etc.) with the emphasis on standards-based teaching and learning. Participants learned the importance of connecting lessons to what students are learning at school before and after their trips, rather than being stand-alone experiences, disconnected from classroom learning. OSWA partnered with OSPI's staff in Science, Outdoor Education, Social Emotional Learning, Physical Education, and the Environmental and Sustainability Program, as OSPI staff shared expertise and connections to support integrated learning. OSWA brought in the Office of Native Education and local tribal experts to teach participants about tribal history, native plants, Indigenous food sovereignty, and the use of OSPI Since Time Immemorial Curriculum, ensuring outdoor school activities incorporate Native American culture, ways of knowing, and history in respectful, accurate, and inclusive ways. Pacific Education Institute, and other local community-based organizations, supported hands-on, experiential science learning in the real world.

OSWA also conducts safety and management reviews for outdoor school sites to ensure all students are welcomed to safe and enriching experiences. As a result, 30 accredited outdoor school sites have welcomed more than 71,000 students to experience outdoor school through this program to date, with deep science learning in the context of the natural world, social-emotional learning with their peers, while creating a sense of community and memories that will last a lifetime.

OSWA's Characteristics of High-Quality Outdoor Schools published a self-guided rubric used by outdoor schools to determine where their program stands in three areas: place-based education, content, and learning requirements. In addition to hosting an all-day training, schools and outdoor school sites are also provided one-on-one coaching by request.

To best serve the student groups listed in the legislation, OSWA developed a funding formula that allocates the most robust funding to schools and districts with the most need. A standard funding formula was adopted using the Western Washington University (WWU) study from 2022³. The standard funding formula allocated \$125 per student per day up to the maximum of 4 nights/5 days. This funding can cover any and all outdoor school expenses, including program fees, transportation, meals/lodging, gear, teacher stipends, extra staffing (if needed), and substitute costs (if needed). Schools were prioritized for funding using Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRLP) student population percentages as a base, and then adding a percentage for each of the historically underserved populations above the state average, as well as whether the school was identified through the Washington State Improvement Framework (WSIF). Based on school requests and available funding, two tiers of funding were provided. Schools with cumulative factors below 38% received half of the standard formula, while schools with factors 38% and above received the full standard formula. Schools that opted for an extended day program due to limitations or cultural differences received \$88 per student. Participation and requests for funding have grown steadily at a rate of about 15-20% annually.

For all three elements of the Outdoor Learning Grant Program, OSWA coordinates with Outdoors for All⁴ whose trained staff delivers adaptive equipment and assistance to support students with disabilities.

TRENDS IN FINDINGS

Across grant reports from all three programs, teachers are qualitatively reporting improvements in students' behavior and academic engagement. Outdoor learning provides powerful context for curriculum integration in science, math, English language arts, social studies, social-emotional learning, and John McCoy (lulilaš) Since Time Immemorial Curriculum. Teachers also report outdoor learning increasing opportunities for and actualization of friendship development and classroom unity. Improved teamwork, leadership skills, and mental well-being among participants is consistently reported. Increased awareness and appreciation for natural resources and conservation efforts are also common themes. Other key findings are outlined below.

³ <https://cbe.wvu.edu/files/2021-11/2021%20WA%20Outdoor%20School%20Study.pdf>

⁴ <https://outdoorsforall.org/>

Overnight Outdoor School Experiences Can Be Life Changing

Overnight Outdoor School provides opportunities for learning and relationship building unparalleled in a student's PreK–12 public school career. Teachers, counselors, parents, and other staff commend the high levels of student engagement and social-emotional growth during these immersive experiences in nature.

Students of diverse abilities participate in activities like canoeing and hiking, with support for those facing motor challenges or language barriers. Personal growth, friendship, and newfound confidence emerge as key themes. Teachers share stories of reluctant campers overcoming fears, developing leadership skills, and gaining emotional resilience. Highlights include students dissecting squid, discovering wildlife, and bonding over shared meals. Both students and educators expressed deep appreciation for this unique learning environment, emphasizing the invaluable emotional and educational benefits.

From Okanogan School District: "We had a reluctant camper who made some great growth in his five days at camp. He was motivating others and took on added responsibilities and brought this camp spirit back to school." This reflects the transformative experience of place-based learning at outdoor schools across Washington state.

Major Shifts in Student Engagement and Understanding

Key themes from teacher feedback include engagement through hands-on activities, increased interest in STEM and environmental topics, appreciation for real-world applications of classroom concepts, enhanced understanding of environmental stewardship, and exposure to potential career paths in STEM fields. Students find their outdoor learning engaging and educational, with many reporting increased curiosity about environmental issues and resource conservation. Hands-on experiences such as FieldSTEM were particularly impactful, catalyzing student engagement.

Schools are prioritizing historically underserved students in science education, ensuring everyone, including those with disabilities, can fully participate. This inclusive approach means that every student feels valued and capable, no matter their background.

"This hands-on experience in collecting and analyzing data made science come alive for (our students), showing them that they can be real scientists. Seeing them grow in confidence and communication skills through these roles was incredible. These magical moments showed us and them that they can make a real difference in their community. In the end, our outdoor education project did more than teach our students about the environment; it empowered them. It gave them the tools and confidence to succeed and make a positive impact on the world around them.... Initially hesitant, students quickly became engrossed

in evaluating the river's health through hands-on activities."

-Easton School District

Making Outdoor Learning Equitable

In the high-poverty and rural areas this funding reaches, many students don't have the opportunity to participate in outdoor educational experiences.

"About 77% of our students are Hispanic and about 30% are English Language Learners. Almost 16% of our students are students with disabilities as well. Many of the(se) students...have not had the opportunity to hike or camp or to spend time exploring the rich outdoor resources that are available in our area. Their parents are working long hours and some of these activities are also not something that is culturally typical for our students. Through this amazing grant opportunity, all of our 7th-grade students were able to spend time this spring in the outdoors."

-Warden School District

Outdoor learning lends itself to place-based instruction that integrates content across subject matter in the context of a student's community. This culturally responsive format makes learning more equitable since many students don't have outdoor experiences without schools offering them. Outdoor learning also engages community partner's support.

The OLGP provides resources that allow schools to build their programs from year to year for ongoing student engagement. Grant recipients report that without these funds, they wouldn't have had the resources or the planning support to get their projects started, and now that they have them, they can continue this project on an annual basis.

Tribal Partnerships and Implementation of John McCoy (Iulilaš) Since Time Immemorial Curriculum

Outdoor learning activities take place in areas with historical and cultural significance to local tribes which students may otherwise never be exposed to. Many projects effectively integrate tribal history, connection, story, and knowledge in meaningful ways, aligning with the requirements of Senate Bill 5433 and the "Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State" curriculum: Incorporation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): Lessons and activities highlight the historical connections between the land and the tribes, including traditional land stewardship practices such as controlled burns, fishing techniques, plant harvesting methods, traditional forest products, prairie management, erosion control and cultural stories related to these places. These practices are discussed in the context of both historical and contemporary conservation efforts.

One example includes the partnership with the Mason Community Partnership, where schools in Shelton School District include lessons on traditional ecological knowledge of local tribes,

emphasizing how indigenous peoples have sustainably managed natural resources for centuries. This includes activities such as shellfish dissection and macroinvertebrate surveys, where students learn about the ecological practices and cultural significance of these species in indigenous cultures. Tribal elders and educators are invited to share their knowledge and stories, providing students with firsthand insights into tribal history and practices.

Professional development is provided for teachers to help them integrate these resources and lessons into their teaching. These studies help to foster a sense of community and respect for the cultural contributions of indigenous peoples. By integrating these elements, the outdoor learning projects provide students with a rich, holistic understanding of tribal history, connection, story, and knowledge. This approach also enriches students' educational experiences by connecting them deeply with the cultural and ecological heritage of their region.

We...had a speaker...from the Confederated tribes of the Colville Reservation, whose grandmother's grandfather was the last chief...of the Wenatchi tribe, who happened to live a few miles away from Cashmere Middle School, up the Nahahum Canyon. (They) shared incredible stories of her grandmother travelling in the spring and collecting camas bulbs in route to Nespelem for a summer visit."

-Teacher, NCESD 171

Breakthroughs for Students Receiving Special Education Services

Outdoor learning is having significant positive impacts on special education students in several key areas, as reported by grant recipients:

- **Improved communication and engagement:** Students with limited verbal abilities in the classroom have shown increased communication during outdoor activities. For example, a student with limited verbal skills was observed talking throughout an entire 5-hour field trip.
- **Inclusivity and belonging:** Outdoor learning spaces create a culture of inclusiveness, allowing for greater engagement of students with health disparities and special needs.
- **Differentiated learning opportunities:** Outdoor environments provide opportunities for differentiated instruction tailored to students' needs. For instance, students with special needs were able to engage in bird identification activities adapted to their abilities.
- **Increased participation:** Students with various diagnosed disabilities, including ADHD, anxiety, depression, and autism, were able to fully participate in outdoor learning activities alongside their peers.
- **Equal access and responsibility:** In many programs, students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and those on the autism spectrum were given the same level of access, responsibility, and trust as their neurotypical peers. Funding provided by the OLGP provides extra paraeducator support to increase access.

- **Enhanced social skills and trust:** Outdoor activities help students develop trust within peer groups and improve social relationships.
- **Cognitive and emotional benefits:** Nature-based learning appears to enhance cognitive abilities, creativity, and problem-solving skills in children with special needs.
- **Physical development:** Outdoor education can help improve motor skills and physical abilities, which is particularly beneficial for children with special needs who may require additional support in these areas.
- **Self-esteem and confidence:** Participation in outdoor activities seems to boost self-esteem, self-confidence, and initiative in children with disabilities.

These observations suggest that outdoor learning environments provide unique and valuable opportunities for special education students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Three 3rd graders with special needs were looking through the binoculars and had support with school staff. They were all engaged in outdoor learning. Students were so excited about bird identification in a way that was differentiated just for them. It was inspiring to see all students engaged in learning about the natural world.
-Wilbur School District

Growth in SEL Skills and Improvements in Mental Health

The mental health crisis among youth is still very relevant today, with data from the CDC⁵ and other sources indicate that young people in the United States are experiencing a significant increase in mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, making it a pressing concern that requires continued attention. Washington state ranks 48th in the nation when it comes to youth mental health or wellness. Teachers report that outdoor learning increases opportunities for and actualization of friendship development and classroom unity. By creating opportunities for students to learn outside of their traditional classroom setting, students find new ways to fit in, learn, and be inclusive of their peers. There are many examples of dramatic gains in Social-Emotional Learning.

"As a school counselor I always appreciate these trips because they afford me rare opportunities to have in-the-moment counseling sessions with students. What usually takes weeks or even months to connect with students is done in a matter of hours to days. It also has a lasting impact on the counselor-student relationship at school from then on. These trips allow me to make more impact, in the least amount of time, which is why I appreciate these trips so much. They are invaluable from a school counselor's perspective. Thank you for continually supporting our students!"
- School Counselor, Lummi Nation School

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/mental-health-numbers.html#:~:text=Youth%20in%20the%20U.S.%20are,2017%202019%202021%202023%20Year>

In a feedback form specific for overnight outdoor school, teachers share stories of reluctant campers overcoming fears, developing leadership skills, and gaining emotional resilience. Both students and educators expressed deep appreciation for this unique learning environment, emphasizing the invaluable emotional and educational benefits. The most surprising aspect of this data is the profound emotional and social impact outdoor education had on students who initially expressed reluctance or anxiety about the experience. For example, the story about the student with severe separation anxiety who, after being terrified to attend camp, ended up enjoying the experience so much that he wasn't ready to leave. His transformation, from crying and begging not to go, to developing friendships and gaining confidence shows the depth of growth students can achieve in a short period.

Another example was a student named Douglas, who was once hesitant about camping, became a leader and was named Camper of the Week. This shows how such experiences can reveal hidden potential in students. The recurring theme of overcoming personal fears and the transformative power of stepping out of one's comfort zone speaks to the unexpected growth that students experience, making these stories stand out as some of the most impactful elements.

There are many similar stories reported across all three components of the Outdoor Learning Grant Program.

What high school students are saying

In Tonasket School district, high school students have the opportunity to serve as outdoor school counselors for 6th graders. These quotes below illustrate their high levels of engagement and investment in their work:

- "I really don't remember the last time I felt that happy."
- "Thanks for such a good time and i hope that the next years kids have a lot of fun"
- "IT WAS THE BEST TIME EVER!!!!!"
- "I liked the feeling of giving the campers a part of their life that they would remember hopefully forever."
- "Standing in as someone the 6th graders can confide in while away from their parents and gaining their trust."
- "I liked being about to give back a memory I had as a 6th grader and being about to connect to so many children."
- "I learned how to take a leadership role and gained lots of new friends and memories."
- "I think I gained invaluable people skills and how to handle certain social situations."
- "Learning how the minds of lots of different little kids work and I learned a lot about endurance."
- "I think it taught me a lesson on patience, it is important to understand why kids act the way they do."

Reinspiring Teachers

The implementation of outdoor learning initiatives has sparked a remarkable transformation in teaching practices and professional development across Washington state schools. Educators report a surge in creativity and enthusiasm for integrating outdoor experiences into their curriculum, leading to more engaging and hands-on approaches to meeting state learning standards. Teachers have embraced the opportunity to modify lessons, particularly in science, to enrich students' learning experiences through direct interaction with nature. The impact extends beyond the classroom, fostering a sense of community among educators, school boards, and parents, who universally express excitement and support for these initiatives. Many teachers describe the outdoor education projects as deeply rewarding and reinvigorating, breathing new life into their professional practice. Professional development opportunities have been instrumental in building a network of educators committed to holistic student well-being through outdoor education. Grantee reports highlight the profound effects of outdoor learning on teaching methodologies, professional growth, and overall educational enthusiasm across various school districts in Washington state.

Staff's metacognition on the benefit and importance of learning in outdoor spaces for themselves and their students is apparent.

"This has been one of the most rewarding projects that I have been a part of. Through this opportunity, we brought together a community of teachers who are interested in the holistic well-being of their students and who recognize the importance of outdoor education. We learned together with the help of amazing local partners, we dreamed together by making connections with our communities, and we faced challenges together by sharing ideas and wisdom. Every educator who was a part of this, including myself, has felt that this has breathed new life into their work and has dismantled the artificial walls that we create which prevent us from letting our students learn in the backdrop of Nature."

-Wahluke School District

Career Awareness and Readiness

The Outdoor Learning Grant program has significantly enhanced career awareness and readiness among students across Washington state. Through diverse outdoor experiences and interactions with professionals in various environmental and natural resource fields, students have gained valuable insights into potential career paths they might not have otherwise considered. These experiences have not only broadened students' horizons but also provided them with practical skills and knowledge that are directly applicable to future careers. From hands-on activities in marine ecology to forestry and wildlife management to outdoor education and recreation, the program has successfully connected classroom learning to real-world applications, inspiring students to envision themselves in STEM and outdoor-related professions.

When students are immersed in the natural world with professionals from their community, it provides them with a new lens through which to consider their future. Students' understanding of possible career choices is often limited by their real-world experiences, and if their families don't have those backgrounds, they may never know they exist. By meeting staff from the Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, and state and federal parks, they gain insight into academic and career paths that are possible from folks who have those jobs. Outdoor learning also provides them opportunities to try out these careers by practicing the skills of an outdoor educator, a field scientist, or a park ranger.

"The positive aspect ... was for students to hear different voices and think about different careers that may include work outdoors and natural resources. One presenter asked our guest, State Park Ranger Velazquez, if he was Mexican, and he responded, 'As a matter of fact, I am the first 100% Mexican State Park Ranger in the state of Washington.'"
-Teacher, NCESD 171

Outdoor learning has proven to be a powerful tool for career awareness and readiness. Students benefit from exposure to a wide range of professionals, including state park rangers, wildlife officials, and maritime experts, gaining firsthand knowledge of diverse career opportunities in environmental and natural resource fields. The program has been particularly impactful for underrepresented and low-income students, providing them with access to experiences they might not otherwise have had. These interactions have not only informed students about potential career paths but also inspired them to pursue their passions, whether in teaching, environmental science, or other STEM fields. By connecting classroom learning to real-world applications and introducing students to role models from diverse backgrounds, the program has successfully broadened career horizons and equipped students with valuable skills for their future professional lives.

Fostering Environmental Stewardship and Students' Sense of Agency

Outdoor learning experiences are having a profound impact on fostering environmental stewardship ethics and a sense of agency in students across Washington state. Through hands-on, immersive activities in nature, students are developing increased curiosity about environmental issues and resource conservation. These experiences help students form deep connections to their local ecosystems and communities, inspiring them to take on roles as environmental stewards. Teachers report that outdoor education allows them to integrate environmental themes and real-world applications into their curriculum in engaging ways. Students are showing remarkable dedication in tackling environmental challenges, from analyzing noise pollution data to raising salmon. The tangible, place-based nature of these activities is nurturing students' resilience, empathy, and sense of empowerment to make positive impacts. Many students are developing strong emotional connections to local wildlife and habitats, seeing themselves as protectors of these natural resources. Overall, outdoor learning is cultivating a generation of students who feel a sense of ownership, pride and responsibility toward their local environment and are motivated to take action as thoughtful, environmentally conscious leaders in their communities.

"Students are formulating questions regarding the human and environmental impact of modern transportation, as our school is located between a rail yard and an interstate connection. Our (student) environmental data crew faced their own challenges when they discovered noise pollution levels exceeding 100 dB at our school. Despite the initial shock, these students showed remarkable perseverance as they collected and analyzed data. Their dedication and growing expertise turned what started as a daunting task into a source of pride and accomplishment. Through these adventures and challenges, our outdoor education program isn't just teaching facts; it's nurturing resilience, empathy, and a deep connection to our environment. It's about empowering our students to become thoughtful leaders who can make a positive impact in their community."

-Teacher, Easton School District

Outdoor learning programs across Washington state are fostering a new generation of environmentally conscious citizens, with students demonstrating increased curiosity about environmental issues, developing strong connections to local ecosystems, and taking pride in their roles as environmental stewards. These programs are empowering students to tackle real-world environmental challenges in their communities.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAM EVALUATION

OSPI collaborated with Western Washington University's Center for Economic and Business Research (CEBR) to collect feedback from teachers, administrators, and support staff on outdoor education programs in Washington funded through these provisos. To achieve this objective, a survey was produced in late summer of 2023 and distribution began October 2023 for grant activities in the 2023–24 school year. OSPI and project partners (Recreation and Conservation Office and Outdoor Schools Washington) managed the survey distribution to gather as many responses as possible from funded programs, ensuring a valid and representative sample from across the state. The survey collected responses through July 20, 2024, and gathered 1,359 responses. Some of the highlights for this survey include:

- 99% of respondents plan to create future outdoor learning experiences
- 90% of respondents plan to find ways to make outdoor learning a regular part of their students' educational experience.
- Teachers were given the chance to choose between five ranges of change in their student's behavior between strong negative change and strong positive change (including a not observed option). More than half (50%) of the respondents noticed strong positive behavior change among students in six of the behavior options.
- Relationship with peers (57.9%)
- Engagement with Learning (51.3%)
- Engagement with place and community (57.7%)
- Comfort outdoors (55.71%)
- Connection to nature (67.14%)

School administrators selected positive changes for approximately 80% of each category. Positive changes were recorded for more than 80% of the categories from support staff. Close to 70% of support staff respondents noticed a strong positive change in students' relationship with peers and connection with nature. 96% agreed that learning experiences were hands-on and experiential. 84% indicated that their outdoor learning lessons provided considered students' previous knowledge, lived experience, and cultural context.

The majority of OSPI and RCO grantees partnered with additional community-based organizations, upwards of 300 different partners, amplifying the impact of the funding. From the WWU survey, 76% of respondents indicated that additional content providers added a high amount of value, and 19% responded they added some value. Less than 5% responded that additional partners added little or no value.

Grant funding increased accessibility. School districts commonly shared that this funding ensured everyone, including those with disabilities, could fully participate. This inclusive approach meant that every student feels valued and capable, no matter their background. This hands-on experience in collecting and analyzing data makes science come alive for them, showing them that they can be real scientists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we look to the future, the program's positive outcomes make a compelling case for its continuation and expansion. The partnerships forged with community organizations, the enthusiasm of participating students, and the dedication of educators all point to a solid foundation upon which to build. By securing ongoing support and resources, we can ensure that more students benefit from these transformative experiences, ultimately contributing to a more equitable, environmentally conscious, and scientifically literate society. The Outdoor Learning Grant Program has proven to be a powerful tool for educational equity, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. Its success is a model for other states and a call to action for continued investment in innovative, inclusive educational experiences. As we face global challenges that require scientific understanding and environmental consciousness, programs like this are beneficial and essential in preparing the next generation to lead us toward a sustainable and prosperous future.

School districts find that having a district-level outdoor learning coordinator, such as a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), greatly benefits efforts to incorporate professionals from tribes, natural resource agencies, and local nonprofits with expertise in local ecosystems and environmental science issues in their communities. This adds the valuable element of career awareness to outdoor learning. This type of additional support also enables the coordination of volunteer participation, such as parents, retired teachers/natural resource professionals, local college students, community service organizations, etc. In our more rural areas, Educational Service Districts are exploring the idea of hosting a similar position to support multiple numbers of smaller school districts.

"This grant has proven to be a powerful tool for educational equity, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. Its success is a model for other districts and a call to action for continued investment in innovative, inclusive educational experiences. As we face global challenges that require scientific understanding and environmental consciousness, programs like this are beneficial and essential in preparing the next generation to lead us toward a sustainable and prosperous future."

– Assistant Superintendent, Tumwater School District

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The 2SHB 2078 Outdoor Learning Grant Program has successfully enhanced outdoor educational experiences for nearly 170,000 students in the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years. Administered by OSPI in collaboration with the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) and the Washington School Principals Education Foundation’s Outdoor School Washington, the program has demonstrated high demand, exceeding available funding.

Conclusions

- The program is effectively supporting the intent of 2SHB 2078 by increasing access to comprehensive outdoor learning opportunities.
- There is significant engagement from historically underserved students, including those in special education and from tribal, migrant, urban, and rural backgrounds.
- Positive feedback from students and teachers highlights the program’s success in making science education accessible and engaging.
- Teachers report significant improvements in students’ behavior and academic engagement through outdoor learning.
- Outdoor learning effectively integrates with various subjects, including science, math, English language arts, social studies, Social-Emotional Learning, and John McCoy (lulilaš) Since Time Immemorial curriculum.
- Activities in historically and culturally significant areas enhance students’ understanding of indigenous histories and practices.
- Dramatic gains in social-emotional learning, friendship development, and classroom unity are evident.
- Positive feedback from teachers and students highlights the transformative impact of outdoor education, fostering curiosity, environmental awareness, and personal growth.

Next Steps

- Secure additional funding to meet the high demand and expand the program’s reach.
- Monitor and evaluate program outcomes to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with educational standards.
- Strengthen regional networks of collaborators, including federally recognized tribes, other state agencies, community organizations, and educational institutions, through professional learning.
- Continue to support the development and refinement of curriculum and resources to support diverse learning needs locally adapted to each region of the state that illuminate career paths.
- Maintain and enhance support for students with diverse abilities to ensure inclusive participation in outdoor learning activities.

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REFERENCES

Second Substitute House Bill 2078: ¹ <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2021-22/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/2078-S2.SL.pdf?q=20230905085529>

Children Nature Network: ² <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/the-equigenic-effect-how-nature-access-can-level-the-playing-field-for-children/>

Washington State Report Card: ³ <https://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/>

Washington State Outdoor School Study: ⁴ <https://cbe.wvu.edu/files/2021-11/2021%20WA%20Outdoor%20School%20Study.pdf>

Youth Mental Health: The Numbers ⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/mental-health-numbers.html#:~:text=Youth%20in%20the%20U.S.%20are,2017%202019%202021%202023%20Year>

Outdoors for All Foundation: ⁶ <https://outdoorsforall.org/>

APPENDICES

Appendix A

[2023-24 Outdoor Learning Grant Program Cumulative Schools List](#)

Appendix B

[Outdoor Learning Grant Program Press and Media Coverage](#)

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