

May 5, 2021

Representative Susan McLain, Co-Chair
Senator Lew Frederick, Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education

Re: Support Full Funding for Outdoor School

Dear Co-Chairs Representative McLain and Senator Frederick, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jennifer Grube and I have been an Outdoor School Director for twenty years. Combined with three years of serving as a Field Instructor, two years as a Cabin Leader and attending as a sixth grader, I have spent 26 years of my life at Outdoor School. I believe in the overall benefits of Outdoor School programming.

Working alongside multiple school districts, I have had the opportunity to build, run and evaluate various Outdoor School programming models. What I've witnessed and continue to learn is that no matter the model - from consecutive day programming to residential - the student and growth trajectory is consistent. Simply outlined, the first day students are skeptical of the outdoor lessons, group dynamic activities that target social emotional learning, and the songs. Midway through programming, students embrace outdoor learning, start to develop characteristics of connecting with the outdoor space, ask to play their favorite group dynamics games, and the songs get louder and more animated. Phrases like, "you can do it" and "how can I help" become audible between students. By the end, students are self-facilitating during field study lessons, they don't ask to play the games - they just set them up on their own, they know their favorite songs and they sing them on their way to field study, they start them spontaneously during activity transitions. They say things like, "I wish we could come back next week" and "Can't school be like this all the time?"

Enter COVID-19. We cancelled, we hoped, we waited. Outdoor School programmers and advocates statewide collaborated on models of comprehensive distance learning (CDL) and possible in-person options, if and when we were able. The idea of teaching students to learn and connect with the outdoors through a screen worried me from a personal teaching philosophy perspective. Not to say it couldn't work but *would* the spirit of Outdoor School translate?

Post CDL program run it became clear that the student growth and trajectory was surprisingly similar to traditional Outdoor School experiences. Students asked to stay longer for virtual cabin times and wanted to share additional field journal entries after ZOOM sessions. As things have developed, we have had the opportunity to run day programming at schools using surrounding natural settings and resources that are within walking distance. Again, as a longtime provider I have been amazed to see the similarity in student behaviors and outcomes as it would relate to Outdoor School programming pre-COVID. It has spoken volumes to the power of quality Outdoor School experiences.

Some notable comments from students, staff, school administrators, and families this year:

“I didn’t think this would be as fun as staying in a cabin, but it is pretty fun. I wish I could have stayed in a cabin though.” - Sixth grade CDL student, February 2021

“I got to meet my teacher for the first time not behind a screen!” - Seventh grade in-person student, April 2021

“I am just glad they get to do something with each other outdoors. I have watched them wilt behind a screen for too long.” - Parent, April 2021

“I haven’t heard my child laugh like this in a long time.” - Parent volunteer during in-person day programming. April 2021

“There are things about being onsite during residential Outdoor School that are too important for kids to miss. Like mealtimes together. Lots of kids don’t get that. Also, having to meet other people they don’t know and make new friends.” - Staff member with three years of previous Outdoor School experience, May 2021

This year our program was able to provide each of our student participants with individual learning kits that allowed them to complete lessons at home during CDL and enabled additional safety measures during in-person programming. We have been able to travel to each participating school and bring the best possible version of Outdoor School programming to our students.

Years ago, during a staff training session I asked the team to describe what Outdoor School meant to them in one word. It looped to a Cabin Leader named, Fossa who said, “Outdoor School can’t be described in one word, it is more of a feeling.” I always knew it was true, I just didn’t know how deeply true it was. We have withstood the test of time, funding and now pandemic. I emphatically advocate for continued support for statewide Outdoor School funding. Our students, families and communities have made it abundantly clear that they value and need it.

Thank you,
Jennifer Grube
Western Oregon Outdoor School Director