



Dear Representative Alonso Leon,

I am writing as a voting constituent to sincerely thank the Oregon Legislature for its investment in Outdoor School over the last two biennia. This has made it possible for many children to experience outdoors for the first time, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender identity, ability, or socio-economic status. I urge you to support the continuation of Outdoor School funding.

Outdoor School is an integral, transformative experience for K-12 instruction and Oregon's youth. Having participated myself as a 6th-grader (42 years ago), I am heartened by the support of my fellow Oregonians for this hands-on, immersive, and STEM-supportive programming.

I am currently the CEO of Straub Outdoors, a nonprofit outdoor education provider based in Salem. Our organization is named after Governor Bob Straub, one of the authors of early land-use planning in our state and a founder of the Willamette River Greenway initiative. In my role, I see the benefits of outdoor school for thousands of students in the mid-Willamette Valley each year.

One student who left an indelible impression on me is Justin*. Justin arrived at outdoor school several years ago sporting white Ray Ban-style sunglasses and a too-cool-for-school attitude. At the time, he was a student at Highland Elementary, a school at which 66% of students identify as BIPOC and 92% are economically disadvantaged. During the 2018-19 school year, only 14.8% of students at Highland were meeting the Oregon Department of Education benchmarks for science. I wish I could say this school was an outlier, but in fact, it's now the norm for many schools in our state.

Highland Elementary is staffed by teachers who are truly heroic; however, hands-on science education is often beyond their means due to the demands of standardized testing and the hours required to address the basic needs of underserved children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Justin was one of those underserved students. He and his brother Jake* live with their mother in a one-bedroom cottage at the edge of an industrial development in North Salem. They do not have easy access to urban green spaces, municipal transportation, or a grocery store. To say outdoor school was an enriching experience for Justin would be an understatement. Over five days, Justin not only conducted ecology investigations and real-world science projects, he also met adults who are engaged in natural science careers and learned about the economic benefits of sustainable natural resource management.

Oregon's economy—and future—relies on supporting our natural resource industries, such as timber, tourism, outdoor recreation, farming and more. Outdoor School is a great way to teach

future generations that they don't need to choose between our economy and the health of our environment.

Outdoor school programs are also places where students gain confidence, relationship skills, and self-awareness. The emotional impact of COVID-19 on students and struggles with distance learning only underscore the importance of getting students outside where they can actively participate in their own education.

Outdoor School funding will make it possible for our organization to continue providing these critical opportunities for 5th- and 6th-grade students statewide and I would like to invite you to come out for a day of outdoor school at one of our field-study locations this fall. Through a partnership with Oregon State Parks, many of our Outdoor School sessions take place at Willamette Mission State Park, Champoeg State Heritage Area, and Silver Falls State Park. We hope you'll join us to see the benefits of Outdoor School first-hand!

Respectfully,



Catherine Alexander
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Straub Outdoors

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** The names of the children in this letter have been changed to protect their safety and privacy.*