

April 28, 2023

Joint Committee on Ways & Means Subcommittee on Education
900 Court St NE
Salem OR 97301

RE: Support for full funding for Outdoor School

Dear Senator Frederick, Representative McLain, and Committee members:

Please join me in supporting continued full funding for Outdoor School. Your support is critical to tens of thousands of Oregon youth, thousands of teachers, hundreds of school districts, and hundreds of people who work to provide this important program.

Participation in outdoor programs (e.g. outdoor school or outdoor learning) is a popular tradition and form of education, recreation, and leisure for many U.S. citizens, and has been an established part of our culture since the early 1900s (Brannan et al., 2003). In Oregon, outdoor learning has been part of education for over 60 years, and in 2016, Oregon voters approved Ballot Measure 99, which designated funding and adoption of Senate Bill 439 and directed the Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Services to assist Education Service Districts and school districts to provide a statewide outdoor education program (Outdoor School) for all of Oregon's 5th and 6th graders. In June 2019, the Oregon Legislature approved \$46.8 million for outdoor school programs statewide over the next biennium. This increase in funding has allowed more students than ever to attend Outdoor School (ODS) by reducing the cost barrier to participation.

"For many children, ODS is their first experience hiking in the forest, getting their feet wet in a stream or exploring sea life along the sandy beach," (Friends of Outdoor School, 2018). In addition to learning in and about Oregon's natural landscape, students also learn about themselves, their peers, and leave with new skills to prepare them for the future (Oregon State University Extension Service Outdoor School, 2020). In a 2017 international systematic review of the effects of curriculum-based outdoor education programs on students' learning, social skills and health, Becker and colleagues discovered that students who attended outdoor education programs demonstrated growth in social dimensions (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, sense of belonging, and trusting relationships) and learning dimensions (e.g., academic performance across subjects, generalization of knowledge and learning motivation).

Although sparse, research on inclusive ODS experiences for students with disabilities, overwhelmingly suggests that students with and without disabilities experience benefits from attending inclusive ODS programs. Results from a 2000 study (Brannan et al.) revealed that across the country, youth with and without disabilities demonstrated significant growth in their outdoor skills and personal development (e.g., self-reliance, social interactions, communication, and self-esteem). Notably, the inclusive programming represented in this study appeared to yield social benefits for all students that may not be possible in segregated programs. After attending an inclusive program, all students demonstrated increased social interactions. Additionally, students with disabilities increased their active participation in program activities, and students without disabilities developed a greater understanding and respect for persons different from themselves.

With the funds appropriated for Outdoor School, in Lane County, a special education teacher was able to take her students who experience a variety of disabilities to ODS for the first time this week. When asked about the experience she stated,

"I wish I could think of a way to capture how special these two days were to my students. They were model students, participants in every group they attended. Outdoor School 2023 was undoubtedly the highlight of the year for my students. All students were able to participate meaningfully, connect with nature, and learn alongside their peers. My instructional assistants are already talking about planning for next year. Our students were seriously model students and so engaged!"

As a special education administrator in Lane County, part of my work is to guarantee that students with disabilities are afforded the same rights and access to educational experiences as their non-disabled peers. Continuing to fund Outdoor School is imperative to guaranteeing that all students have equal and equitable access to the benefits that can be realized by attending Outdoor School.

Students and families in Lane County rely on the funding for Outdoor School to reduce barriers to attendance. Additionally, funds are necessary to provide additional supports to children with disabilities so they can participate and access Outdoor School in a meaningful way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stacy Arbuckle". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

Stacy Arbuckle PhD.
Special Education Program Administrator
Lane Education Service District
(253) 365-3363