

To Chair Hudson, Vice-chairs Dobson and McIntire, Members of the Committee,

If this is your first time hearing a story about outdoor school, this probably isn't the letter you should read first. I am confident that you could hear about the magic of the impact of these programs by walking down a block, riding a bus, max, participating in a community gathering and asking folks around you what outdoor school is and how it has impacted them. You will probably hear a lot of similar stories. Memories of an experience in 6th grade that gave them a new outlook, a new experience, a new friend from another school. Confidence that they gained while attending as a volunteer, and building a new skill that they didn't know they had. The job experience that they earned while working day in and day out to help a teen through adolescence while also learning the importance of community and how to create it more often. Those are the kinds of stories you might hear, among many others that are inspiring or heartwarming as you hear about folks who have experienced something transformational.

This? This is not that story. I am going to share an experience that doesn't get shared often, at least not in circles that I have heard. I want to share with you my experience as a site supervisor of an outdoor school program and the multiple things that I work hard to aspire to each and every week I facilitate an outdoor school program.

Let me first give you some context as to what my role is. A site supervisor, in general, is the person who is responsible for the program and all of the participants in that program. Their wellbeing, safety and education. This role supports the staff who educate and take care of all of the 6th grade students. Make sure emergency procedures are in place, in case we need to assure safety during a crisis. Help facilitate and assure that students get the meds and care they need while attending. Etc etc.

Each season, before we get onto our site and prepare for the students' arrival, I get the honor to meet each of the kids in their classroom. I get to explain what their experience will look like, what the schedule is going to be, share photos of the cabins they will be staying in, the bathrooms they will use, the places they will eat food together, and what kinds of things they will learn about. I answer questions and address their fears as in that moment, some of them realize they will be away from home for an extended amount of time. For some, this is the first time they will be away from home overnight, let alone for multiple days. Although my goal, on the surface, might sound like I am just giving them information about this unique experience, my true intention is to show up for them and reassure them that someone other than their teacher or friend will care about them when they are there. I build a relationship with them. I calm nerves and invite them to something safe. Before I leave each class I let them know that my hope is that they leave this experience with a stronger voice for their community. I say-

*"My goal is that you leave this week with a better appreciation of the natural world. You may already have a strong appreciation for the world outside this classroom, but at some point in the near future. Sooner than you may want to accept, you will have the power to vote and make change in your community. Like your folks in your community at home, they voted for you to have this experience, to get this experience funded so that everyone can have an experience*

*like this. YOU will have the ability to use your vote to keep places like your back yard, and this outdoor school site you will attend, and places all over Oregon healthy. No pressure.”*

The seed is planted.

I leave their classroom excited for them to attend, while taking mental notes of classroom dynamics to see how they might pair with the other classes from other schools.

The day comes where the kids arrive. After hours of helping them get acclimated to this new place I gather everyone up and set expectations and show them all of the adults who will help create the experience that week. I share with them that we are building a community of kindness and that there are actions that we exclude from that community but we do not exclude people, everyone is welcome. Actions and behaviors we exclude are acts of Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. Directly after that I tell them that if they experience any of those things from someone else in this community, including myself, they need to use their voice and tell someone. The most powerful thing they have while they are out here is their voice, and that voice makes a huge difference to keep this community kind.

Seed number two is planted.

On the last night, during the last campfire together I share with them the impact of their voice. I tell stories of the week where I saw students be brave and overcome challenges with their voice. Asking for help, sharing knowledge with each other, collaborating with people they just met to create stories on stage. As I share these stories, candles get passed out to people in the audience to hold onto. Those folks in the audience of the campfire are holding candles to represent the people who made an impact during the week. I share that these folks who hold light held that light the entire time but didn't know it. That we all have a light inside of us that makes an impact on others and it's our choice how we use that light. That we always have a choice to create good and kind spaces like the one created this week. As long as they have the courage to show up and use their voice to make a positive difference.

The next morning, right as they leave on their bus back home, I remind them that they can create communities like the one they experienced back at their home. That back in their community, there is someone who needs their voice and their light to make a better place. More importantly, there are places that need their vote to keep this state healthy, just like the adults in their community did to give them this experience.

I don't know what choices people make when they go back home. I may never know how many people take action in the moment to create better places. But I know that the intention to create more voters in our community was set.

I believe in the power that one person can make a difference. This program is how I make my difference, by inspiring others. Now, unfortunately, because of the change in funding, the site that I worked at: Westwind, is no longer able to serve students. I no longer have the ability to

use my position to make a positive impact. At least not until funding is restored. At Westwind, in the last 4 years we have served over 3000 students and empowered over 500 high school students to be better leaders.

The people who do this work care. At every level of the program. Everyone who reads this or hears this wants to make a difference in the world and help kids understand their power. Reducing funds reduces our impact on the state. If we want Oregon to be a stronger, more inclusive, and open to shining our light, I urge you to reinstate funding so that we can make Oregon a better place.

Start with Representative Hudson's Legislation House Bill 4112 to restore 6 million in outdoor school funding for 2026. But then take the next step and advocate for more to be restored. Show the state that their voices matter and you will push to make sure that at least 4% of lottery funds will be allocated to Outdoor School like Measure 99 stated. Empower the voters that used their voice to make this place better.

Thank you.  
Joey Mata