



NETWORK of OREGON  
WATERSHED COUNCILS

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Committee on Energy and Environment  
Oregon House of Representatives

### **Concerns About HB 2516**

The Network of Oregon Watershed Councils supports the efforts of over 80 watershed councils statewide that work collaboratively to enhance watershed health and benefit their local communities.

Community outreach and education is a key component of the grass roots approach councils take to building relationships with landowners for watershed restoration. Councils broadly support the educational outcomes that HB 2516 is intended to promote, but the bill potentially has significant unintended consequences. The creation of a statewide outdoor school program would have tremendous value, but HB 2516 would divert funds away from existing outreach and restoration programs that already support many of the outcomes this bill promotes.

Councils in urban and rural communities around the state have leveraged OWEB funds and forged partnerships with schools, conservation districts, state and federal agencies, and other local organizations to create place-based educational programs that address locally recognized needs. These programs provide opportunities for youth of all ages to be engaged with issues of local and regional importance that impact the natural world in their immediate environment. Many of these outreach efforts extend through the entire school year, expose youth participants to local community leaders and volunteers, and ultimately help create pathways to life-long involvement in natural resource issues.

Councils have a long track record of working with partners to leverage funding for restoration activities. In addition to other ecological and social benefits, these restoration projects ultimately create living classrooms that councils, conservation districts, and their partners are using to engage youth in place-based education and service learning programs. These living classrooms also benefit outreach that targets the general public, as well as university programs and researchers. If HB 2516 were to divert resources from these restoration efforts, many of these benefits would be lost.

To quote one council coordinator, "Many things are best done locally, and that's what watershed councils and their partners are all about." Councils are more than willing to collaborate and think strategically about youth education, in much the same way they have for restoration. Perhaps rather than trying to fund a new program, it would make sense to look at how existing community-based environmental education programs can be better leveraged and even expanded. There may also be other revenue sources that can be used to achieve the same outcomes without diverting funds from watershed restoration and related outreach programs.