

HB2516

March 4, 2013

Dear Senator Shields and Representative Bailey:

I had the great privilege to work at MESD Outdoor School - the most inspiring job I can imagine ever having. Like many others, it led me into a fabulous career as a science educator.

If I were to plan a "perfect" world, I would model it after MESD Outdoor School. It is a magical place where everyone is deeply committed to the success of each individual participating in the program. 6th graders, high school students, teachers, and staff are all trusted with great responsibility, and held accountable for their actions in the most positive and caring ways. The ultimate goal is for each person to be and give the very best of him or herself. The learning is real, memorable, hard, relevant, personal, profound - and most importantly, it's fun. Learning is about science. But, almost more importantly, it is about community. It is seeing how natural communities work, and recognizing that just as each small living and non-living element in a natural community has its role, its place, its contribution to make - so too do we have our roles, and our contributions - positive or negative as we may choose - to our social communities, to the natural environment we rely on, to our local community, and to our global community. There is simply no better model for how to be our best most accountable selves in this complicated world.

For many 6th graders, their week at Outdoor School is an opportunity to experience new ways to learn, new ways to be smart, new ways to express themselves, new ways to be seen and heard. I watched this first-hand, over and over again, day after day, week after week. Kids who had always struggled in the classroom became unrecognizable to their teachers, and even to themselves, as they experienced what it felt like to be smart and capable, often for the first time in their lives.

And while what Outdoor School does for 6th graders is powerful and unique, it is almost no match for the experience it provides for high school students. I believe that we regularly undersell our teenagers. We don't give them a chance to demonstrate their fullest potential. At Outdoor School, high school students are truly put to the test. They are trusted to take on huge responsibilities and meet tremendous challenges. And when given that trust, they step up to the plate in ways that left me floored on a daily basis. They act as leaders, teachers, and role models. They set aside their selfish teenage selves for a moment, and find that giving and teaching and leading is the most rewarding experience could ask for. They work hard, and they learn, and they grow in ways that inspire them to stay in school, to study, to come back to Outdoor School, to graduate, to go to college, to become a teacher, to become a scientist, to become a mentor, to become a good neighbor, to become a leader.

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We need ALL kids to have access to this type of learning, this type of profoundly positive experience with nature, this type of community, this unique opportunity to see themselves and others at their very best. For close to half a century, MESD Outdoor School offered that opportunity to every single 6th grader and hundreds of high school students year after year in Multnomah County. For many decades, every student attended - every school, every class, every ability level. If there is a model for equity - Outdoor School is it.

I have participated actively in various efforts to “save” Outdoor School over the years. Unfortunately this seems to be needed more and more frequently in recent years. MESD continues to provide a stellar Outdoor School experience to students, but not all districts participate now, and the program is only 3 days long for many students. This legacy program, that is part of Oregon’s heritage, and has served as a model for the nation, is quickly eroding. Any more erosion and it will become difficult to rebuild.

We need long-term solutions to Outdoor School funding. Instead of watching it erode away, we need to honor that this program is a “well-oiled machine”, an irreplaceable asset that we should be replicating throughout the state, making it available to all Oregonians.

The Outdoor School program has recently been treated as an optional elective. We need to recognize that the week-long Outdoor School program is a crown jewel of an Oregon education. Few programs can offer this much value, at such low cost, for every single child in a school system. At Outdoor School we learn about science, community, leadership, confidence, accountability, trust, honesty, interrelationship, and most importantly, at Outdoor School we learn to care—care about others, care about learning, care about staying in school, care about being our best, care about leading, and care about becoming someone who can make a difference in the world, and make it better. The Outdoor School experience is fundamental to building the WHOLE people we are depending on to become the future leaders and innovators we desperately need in our ever changing community and environment. Oregon NEEDS Outdoor School. I urge you to be part of the solution.

Very sincerely,

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