

Portlanders for Outdoor School

Parents, students, teachers and community members standing up for outdoor school education in Portland

March 2, 2013

Representative Jules Bailey
900 Court St. NE, H 274
Salem, OR 97210

Subject: HB2516

Dear Representative Bailey:

We are writing in support of LC 2238, the bills that would allow Oregon Watershed Enhancement board funds to be used for hands-on, school-based ecological learning programs that include Outdoor School.

Outdoor School—an overnight experience with hands-on study of water, soil, plants, and animals—is part of Oregon’s heritage, having begun in 1958. In Multnomah County, 6th grade students attended a week of MESD Outdoor School for almost 45 years. Qualified instructional staff are employed to ensure a rich, 24-hour living experience where, without interruption, 6th graders, their teachers, and high school leaders explore forest, streams, and fields. The science education is augmented by traditional camp activities, daily community responsibilities, and team-building activities with students from diverse backgrounds.

We have been trying to preserve the MESD program in Multnomah County from disappearing. Some school districts have already eliminated it entirely. Others, including Portland Public Schools, cut it to one-half week, but it may not happen at all next school year. If staff and infrastructure are lost, it will be very difficult or impossible to reconstitute at a later time. Already the program has lost two of five local campground sites.

Outdoor School, currently available to 45% of Oregon’s students should be funded equitably and include all students of the state. At a time when young people spend so much time indoors interfacing with electronic devices, hands-on ecological education in the field and a connection with one’s local watershed, are more important than ever. While schools with affluent parents may be able to afford private outdoor education programs, publically funded programs are the only option for reaching students in schools with a high percentage of low-income families.

The engaging educational experience of Outdoor School increases retention in school, awakens interest in science, and leads to a desire for higher education. It has prompted thousands of teenagers to become teachers, conservation educators, or natural resource professionals. Outdoor School is needed statewide to build the next generation of leaders who will protect and restore Oregon’s wildlife habitats.

Outdoor School needs to be put on a stable financial footing. As we have explored possible funding sources during the past year, we have found no source that is as appropriate and long-term as the funds distributed by the Oregon Water Enhancement Board.

Yours truly,

Jeanne Roy, Chair
Portlanders for Outdoor School
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