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Testimony

House Education Committee

House Bill 2648

February 16, 2015

Chair Doherty and Members of the Committee, I am Rex Burkholder, representing the Oregon Outdoor Education Coalition, a new organization formed to promote the benefits of using Oregon's tremendous natural setting to inspire, motivate and engage Oregonians of all ages. Today we are here to ask you to support HB 2648, which would establish sufficient and sustainable funding for what is truly an Oregon tradition, outdoor school.

If you are one of the million plus Oregonians who went to outdoor school, you will know first hand the magic of learning about nature and our natural resources. Learning about the forests while walking through them. Learning about geology by getting muddy. Learning about salmon and rivers by wading in the waters.

The first outdoor school in Oregon was founded in Curry County in 1958 by retired foresters and wildlife biologists who saw young people losing touch with their heritage. By the late 1960s, well over 80% of Oregon's schoolchildren got to spend a week learning about science and Oregon – at the coast, in the woods and in the desert. Outdoor school is a transformative experience. You will hear today from education experts who will can tell you better than I how outdoor school advances all our educational goals and develops leadership, collaborative skills, and interest in learning as well as bringing together kids from all walks of life and all parts of the state.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that twenty years of tight budgets have devastated this outstanding educational experience. Currently only about half of Oregon's schoolchildren have outdoor school offered by their districts. And most districts that still offer it, can only afford a much shorter and less impactful program. Most districts pay for outdoor school through high parent fees and fundraising. The loss is felt particularly hard in poorer, rural districts.

Oregonians know how effective outdoor school is. And they overwhelmingly support it. In survey after survey, voters throughout the state tell us that outdoor school is a worthy program, worthy enough for them to say that they are willing to raise their taxes to provide it.