



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

CALL TO ACTION: HB 4112 - RESTORE OUTDOOR SCHOOL FUNDING

February 2, 2026

We are a state-of-the art facility serving nearly 1,000 Outdoor School students a year.

Ashland Family YMCA Camp DeBoer proudly offers Outdoor School to nearly 1,000 fifth- and sixth-grade students who come from schools throughout southern Oregon. Camp DeBoer, which was completed in 2021, is a state-of-the-art facility tucked within the coniferous forests of the Cascade Mountains and perched on the sandy shore of stunning Lake of the Woods in Klamath County. Our gorgeous site is comfortable and accessible for all of our student and adult participants, ADA compliant, and offers an ideal mix of wetlands, forests, wildlife habitats, and lakefront shorelines where we offer site-based, hands-on environmental education.

As a \$500,000 program, we have provided discounts to participating schools totaling \$100,000 this school year. After a busy fall outdoor school season, and with all our contracts in place for the upcoming spring season, we have real numbers and can accurately share with you the impact of the budget cuts to our non-profit organization. OSU Extension offered workshops and listening sessions last summer in order to find a solution to the extensive cuts that were made in the last legislative session. As such, we were told to expect a 20% cut to our gross income, which has become a reality this year. Given that we are a half-million-dollar program, with 10-12 weeks of programming in two seasons, we have graciously extended discounts to our partner schools to the tune of \$100,000 for the 2025-2026 school year.

We're offering the same high-quality programming at a discount while our operating costs have skyrocketed.

We felt very fortunate to be able to offer the same high-quality programming to our students this year, despite the budget cuts. We made a commitment to continue offering all of our engaging hands-on field studies, recreation opportunities, educational evening rotations, entertaining campfires, and camp traditions that our participating schools have come to know and love. Prior to their visit, we travel to meet the students in their classrooms for a 1.5-hour hands-on presentation so that they feel welcomed and excited to attend Outdoor School at our site. In addition, we offer a 1-hour family night so that parents and guardians can properly prepare their children and feel a sense of comfort after learning more about our program. We decided to retain all of these important elements of our program this year. We even welcomed over 10 new schools to our site and are excited about this rapid rate of growth.

While offering these one-time deep discounts, we have simultaneously been faced with a 5% increase in our food and utility costs. Personnel costs have risen 10-15%. And, our fire insurance has skyrocketed due to the high cost of replacing our multi-million-dollar facility should a wildfire rip through our site.

ASHLAND FAMILY YMCA

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Restored funding will help us continue to offer this program.

We value the partnerships we have developed with our schools and districts over the past four years. I have personally responded to principals and teachers who have called me in tears, fearing that they wouldn't be able to come to Outdoor School this year after learning about the budget crisis. We would love nothing more than to continue these valuable partnerships and allow future students from our partner schools to come to Outdoor School once they reach fifth or sixth grade. We often hear students sharing that their older siblings came to Camp DeBoer for Outdoor School and they have been looking forward to it ever since.

We can't afford to continue under the same monetary constraints.

We will not be able to operate at this capacity for another year. With rising operational and personnel costs, and our surplus fund depleted, we will not be able to sustain this program with the current state budget. We are not alone. Most southern Oregon Outdoor School providers are in this position.

Research consistently shows that learning in natural environments has many benefits.

Participating in lessons that transform abstract concepts into hands-on tangible learning opportunities improves focus, boosts memory, and nurtures problem-solving skills, giving children a stronger academic foundation, according to an article recently published by Common Sense Press. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that students in outdoor education programs improved science test scores by 27%. Other studies highlight how outdoor learning fosters critical thinking, communication and group collaboration, boosts mental health and social-emotional learning, and improves self-confidence and mindfulness while reducing stress and addictive screen time. In addition, students at YMCA Camp DeBoer are physically active and engaged in activities throughout the day, improving their physical fitness and reaping the benefits of exposure to fresh air, a pristine natural environment and plenty of sunshine. My staff and I always enjoy watching "kids being kids" as we offer both structured and unstructured outdoor play and nature exploration.

It is my hope that you will use this information and the above talking points to do everything you can to restore full funding to Oregon Outdoor School! I appreciate your time and attention to this very important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Karin A. Onkka".

Karin A. Onkka, Outdoor Education Director
Ashland Family YMCA Camp DeBoer Outdoor School Program