



Expanding Student Access to Outdoor Education

Community Partner: Outdoor Schools Washington

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Describe the specific need within the K–12 system

Washington state has signaled recognition of the importance of outdoor-based learning experiences for K–12 students through substantial state investment in recent years. The benefits of outdoor education for Washington youth are manifold, with research showing that students who participate in outdoor educational activities are more likely to graduate, experience fewer disciplinary incidents in school, and have more relationships with peers, higher academic achievement, more critical thinking skills, and more direct experience of scientific concepts in the field. They also have better leadership and collaboration skills and a deeper engagement with learning, place, and community.¹

Historically, schools serving higher percentages of students identified as low-income have struggled to offer outdoor learning opportunities such as field trips and overnight camps, and where they are offered, students identified as low-income are not always able to access them. These same students are at highest risk of disengaging from school, with the Washington State Report Card showing persistent gaps in attendance and academic outcomes for students identified as low-income. One factor that drives these enduring inequities is the disconnect many students experience between what they learn in the classroom and their everyday lives. This disconnect is particularly strong among students in communities that don't have the resources to offer or access the types of hands-on learning opportunities that connect a student's education with the world around them.²

It is these students who are positioned to benefit the most from outdoor, place-based learning in schools. Intentional and high-quality outdoor learning experiences, even in simple activities like gardening,³ are connected to positive academic outcomes for students across all academic subjects and fosters a deep and enduring love of learning.⁴

¹ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. 21 August, 2024. *Outdoor Learning Grant Program*.

<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/science/outdoor-learning-grant-program>

² Schwarz, C.V., Passmore, C., Rieser, B.J. (2017). *Helping Students Make Sense of the World Using Next Generation Science and Engineering Practices*. National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) Press.

https://staic.nsta.org/pdfs/NSTAPress_TowardMoreEquitableLearningInSciencePB351X.pdf

³ Wells, N.M., Myers, B.M., et al. (2015). The Effects of School Gardens on Children's Science Knowledge: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Low-Income Elementary Schools [Abstract]. *International Journal of Science Education*, 37(17), 2858-2878. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1083156>

⁴ Leiberman, G.A., Hoody, L.L. (30 July, 1998). *Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning. Results of a Nationwide Study*. State Education and Environmental Roundtable.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED428943.pdf>

Beyond academics, students engaged in outdoor learning see significant gains in social and emotional well-being including increased self-confidence and positive self-image. These life-changing experiences strengthen both individual and community identity among students who may be used to seeing themselves left behind and left out. Exposure to place-based outdoor learning deepens student understanding of scientific principles in their everyday world and empowers students to see themselves as part of their community, part of the natural world, and part of the world's next generation of community and environmental stewards.

Providing equitable access to outdoor education opportunities that are accessible to all students regardless of physical, cultural, geographic, or economic challenges is a massive undertaking and requires consistent funding for a variety of programs and program offerings, and further investment in program expansion. From lessons taking place within green spaces on school grounds to multi-day, overnight outdoor learning experiences, outdoor education requires dedicated resources to cover the costs of creating and accessing outdoor learning spaces both on and off campus, purchase materials, provide transportation, and invest in professional learning for educators adapting lesson plans to include outdoor learning.

Washington's K–12 system must continue to develop and maintain agile and adaptive funding mechanisms to meet the unique needs of diverse families and communities and ensure that every Washington student has the opportunity to benefit from outdoor learning.

How a state investment in community partnership meets this need

In response to recent state investments in outdoor education, Outdoor Schools Washington was created by the Washington School Principals' Education Foundation (WSPEF), a nonprofit foundation that oversees student leadership activities, manages an outdoor learning center, and offers professional development services to educators and school leaders. Recognizing the need for a multifaceted approach, Outdoor Schools Washington grants fund work across three key spheres of develop and expansion of diverse and far-reaching outdoor education opportunities across the state: schools, districts, and Tribes looking to provide high-quality outdoor learning to their students; community-based organizations (CBOs), Tribes, government agencies, and nonprofits that operate as outdoor learning providers; and overnight outdoor learning centers that offer day-long or multi-day outdoor educational experiences. The different types of outdoor learning experiences funded by these grants empower schools and communities to develop and engage programs that meet their students' localized needs.

Students who participate in programs funded through Outdoor Schools Washington engage in outdoor-based science education through activities and projects centered around gardening, FieldSTEM, career-based outdoor and environmental learning, and multi-day overnight camp experiences. WSPEF prioritizes and provides professional development and materials centered around high-quality outdoor-oriented education for educators taking on this work, empowering teachers to weave outdoor learning into curricula and lesson planning beyond science, focusing particularly on overlap and integration into the state mandated *John McCoy (lulilaš) Since Time Immemorial Curriculum*. By using the Targeted Equitable Funding Tool (TEFT) designed by OSPI, the WSPEF model prioritizes students historically underserved in science no matter where they are.

Describe existing or previous state investment in this work

In the 2021–23 biennial Operating Budget, the Legislature allocated \$10 million to OSPI for Outdoor Schools Washington grants. The Legislature increased their investment to \$20 million in the 2024 fiscal year and \$20 million in the 2025 fiscal year, found in Senate Bill 5950, Sec. 522(3)(n).

The cost of operating high-quality outdoor education has risen alongside inflation and other factors driving up costs across the board. In order for Outdoor Schools Washington to maintain the same level of service statewide, the program requires additional state investment.

SUPPORTING DATA AND EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE IMPACT

Outdoor Schools Washington’s 2023–24 grants supported outdoor education for over 70,000 students from 691 schools spread across 194 school districts, including over half of the state’s 5th and 6th graders. The program is new, just now entering its third year, and has so far gathered qualitative data pointing to significant positive impacts for Washington students. Educators engaged in outdoor learning report better academic and social-emotional outcomes among students, including more engagement in the classroom, increased self-confidence, positive social skills, and a stronger sense of community among participating students.⁵ Quantitative data is expected in the coming months and will be shared with lawmakers and budget writers.

FISCAL DETAIL

Operating Expenditures	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Fund 001-1 (Program 05X)	10,033,000	10,911,000	11,832,000	12,780,000
Total Expenditures	10,033,000	10,911,000	11,832,000	12,780,000
Biennial Totals	\$20,944,000		\$24,612,000	
Staffing	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
FTEs	1.45	1.45	1.45	1.45
Average Annual	1.45		1.45	
Object of Expenditure	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Obj. A	\$18,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Obj. B	\$6,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000
Obj. C	\$8,999,000	\$9,804,000	\$10,634,000	\$11,488,000
Obj. E	\$4,000	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$3,000
Obj. G	\$4,000	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$3,000

⁵ Wilson, Sheila. *2SHB 2078 (Outdoor Learning Grant Prg)*. (2023). Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2024-05/2023_proviso_report_outdoor_education_eu2_-ev2_-ew2.pdf

Obj. J	\$3,000	\$0	\$0	\$0
Obj. N	\$999,000	\$1,087,000	\$1,178,000	\$1,272,000
Revenue	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Fund 001-1	0	0	0	0
Total Revenue	0	0	0	0
Biennial Totals	\$0		\$0	

ASSUMPTIONS AND CALCULATIONS

Expansion, reduction, elimination or alteration of a current program or service:

The Legislature created the program during the 2021–23 biennium and provided \$10 million in fiscal year 2023 (\$10 million total for the biennium). The Legislature increased their investment to \$20 million in the 2024 fiscal year and \$20 million in the 2025 fiscal year (\$40 million total for the biennium).

OSPI assumes the program will continue to be funded at \$20 million per year through the next two biennia. Therefore, OSPI is requesting an additional \$10,033,000 in fiscal year 2026 and an additional \$10,911,000 in fiscal year 2027 and beyond for a total additional amount of \$20,944,000 in the 2025–27 biennium.

Detailed assumptions and calculations:

OSPI requests the following to expand the current Outdoor Education program:

Contracts

OSPI assumes a continued contract with WSPEF to provide overnight, outdoor education learning experiences for 5th and 6th grade students. OSPI assumes the increased funds would serve over 57,000 students across 191 school districts, with an estimated contract cost of \$8,000,000 in fiscal year 2026, \$8,717,000 in fiscal year 2027, \$9,456,000 in fiscal year 2028, and \$10,216,000 in fiscal year 2029.

OSPI assumes a continued contract with the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO). OSPI assumes the increased funds would serve over 30,000 students across 121 school districts, with an estimated contract cost of \$999,000 in fiscal year 2026, \$1,087,000 in fiscal year 2027, \$1,178,000 in fiscal year 2028, and \$1,272,000 in fiscal year 2029.

Grants

OSPI assumes continuation of the Outdoor Schools grant program, funding over 90 outdoor education programs, serving approximately 42,000 students across 143 school districts. OSPI estimates grant costs of \$999,000 in fiscal year 2026, \$1,087,000 in fiscal year 2027, \$1,178,000 in fiscal year 2028, and \$1,272,000 in fiscal year 2029.

Staffing

This request includes funding for the following staffing levels:

- 1.0 FTE Program Consultant to manage the Outdoor Education program
- 0.35 FTE Administrative Assistant 3 to support the Program Consultant and Outdoor Education program
- 0.10 Program Specialist 3 to implement and track outdoor education contracts

Total staffing costs: \$36,000 in fiscal year 2026 and \$20,000 annually thereafter.