

OUTDOOR SCHOOL

Three days not enough for children to be with nature

EDWARD WOLF
IN MY OPINION

For the 48th autumn in a row, thousands of sixth-graders across

Oregon will pull on boots, pack bedrolls and gather nervously outside their schools, waiting for buses that will take them to Outdoor School, the state's award-winning experiment in hands-on science education.

Joined with kids from other schools and districts, accompanied by their classroom teachers and a team of high school student leaders, they will learn about plants, animals, soil and water — in the midst of plants, animals, soil and water.

None will forget Outdoor School.

The program is a great equalizer, bringing kids from every walk of life together in the intimacy of rustic cabins and Oregon forests for field study, campfires and home-style meals. For some kids, it is their first time away from home. For others, it is their first visit to a forest. Every kid brings back a story.

Oregonians love Outdoor School, with that offhand love we reserve for things we take for granted. But Outdoor School has seen hard times in recent years, as the recession ravaged the state's general fund and school districts struggled to make ends meet. Discretionary



THE OREGONIAN/2001

programs, including Outdoor School, were cut to the bone.

A robust six-day experience became, for most public school districts, a three-day program. One metro-area district dropped out entirely. Parent and student fundraising efforts sustained others in a desperate attempt to keep learning essentials on life support during a “takeaway” decade that none wishes to repeat.

Now many districts are hiring new teachers. Programs are being restored. More Oregon schoolchildren will encounter the Douglas firs, the salmon rivers, the salal and sword ferns that are their birthright. Or will they?

This fall, most Portland-area middle schools will send their sixth-graders to Outdoor School camps for two nights, except for the handful of participating independent and parochial schools, whose students will attend Outdoor School for five nights.

A wedge of inequity has split the treasured

Outdoor School experience into a “lite” version — good enough for public school kids — and a “full” version for schools and communities that choose to pay more. Educators who know 11-year-olds best know that the difference between three days and six days is profound. The full benefits of residential outdoor learning cannot be absorbed in just 72 hours.

Twenty-five years ago this November, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most rapidly ratified human rights treaty in history. Among its provisions, the treaty asserts the child's right to education, including “the development of respect for the natural environment.” (The United States has signed the UNCRC but is one of only three UN member states — along with Somalia and South Sudan — not to have ratified it.)

The world's oldest global conservation organization, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, built on this cornerstone

recently with a resolution of its own expressing every child's “inherent right to connect with nature in a meaningful way.”

With a tradition of outdoor learning that spans five decades, Oregon could choose to be the first U.S. state to claim the right of its children to connect with nature, and help push the global community toward recognizing this right for every child. But until Outdoor School is restored to six days for all children — and extended to every Oregon school and community that would like to offer the program — Oregon will fall short of fulfilling that right.

It's time to remove the wedge of inequity. Let's fully fund Outdoor School, and give every sixth-grade student in Oregon the chance to learn about plants, animals, soil and water — in the presence of plants, animals, soil and water.

•
Edward Wolf is a Portland writer whose two grown daughters were Outdoor School student leaders.

