

Expanding the Classroom: Students take in Outdoor School

EAST OREGONIAN

Published on May 5, 2016 12:01AM

Last changed on May 5, 2016 9:58PM



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

John Nelson of Pilot Rock learns how to butterfly roll a fire hose from suppression specialist Tyler Arbogast at a combined Helix and Pilot School school district outdoor school Wednesday at Meadowood Springs near Tollgate.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Students take aim during an archery class at a combined Helix and Pilot School school district outdoor school Wednesday at Meadowood Springs near Tollgate.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Helix senior Makenzie Mize, top left, and Pilot Rock senior Cayce Marshall, top right, teach an art class at a combined Helix and Pilot School school district outdoor school Wednesday at Meadowood Springs near Tollgate.

The classroom is a bit bigger for fifth- and sixth-graders this month.

Each year, school districts in Umatilla and Morrow counties take the classroom outside and travel up to the mountains and down to the coast for outdoor school.

For some students, outdoor school will be the first time they have gone camping or spent a full day in the mountains. For most, it is a chance to learn new skills and experiences.

“Outdoor school provides kids an opportunity to learn in a different manner than what we might do in a classroom,” Helix sixth-grade teacher Sharilyn Newton said Wednesday. “It allows kids to shine who might not with a pen or pencil.”

Most school districts in Umatilla and Morrow counties participate in an outdoor school program.

Some schools, including Stanfield and Echo, head up to Tupper above Heppner, Irrigon Elementary travels to Camp Hancock in Fossil and Boardman’s Windy River Elementary sends students to the Oregon coast. Some districts will send as few as 15 students to an outdoor school program this year; the Hermiston School District will send 475 fifth-graders.

This week, students from Helix and Pilot Rock visited Meadowood Springs near Tollgate for an outdoor school experience.

Smaller schools, such as Pilot Rock and Helix or Echo and Condon, often combine to maximize the use of the camp facilities — and to expose students to new people.

“I think it’s great that we join with Helix because we are a small school and it’s an opportunity to meet new kids,” Pilot Rock sixth-grade teacher Laura Byrnes said.

Newton agreed.

“This is a nice opportunity for them to see we’re really very much alike. You can compete in sports but still be friends,” she said. “Some older kids have kept in touch with the friends they made at outdoor school for years.”

The sixth-graders from Pilot Rock and Helix took in classes in archery, forestry, first aid and weather for three days in the mountain setting. The small schools also took photos and made videos about the food chain, competed in obstacle courses and learned about wildland firefighters. Students caught frogs and

went on nature hikes, cooked breakfast on a campfire and paddled canoes.

For many districts — Pilot Rock and Helix included — high school juniors and seniors serve as camp counselors, volunteering their time to experience — or re-experience — outdoor school as a teenager.

“They leave here, and the first thing they want to do is come back and be a counselor,” Newtonson said. “It’s special to see the kids grow up and want to come back.”

Cayce Marshall, a senior at Pilot Rock High School, is one of those students. Marshall returned to outdoor school to lead a watercolor class.

“This is my very first experience in coaching little kids in painting, but I think it’s going pretty well,” Marshall said Wednesday. “It’s not really about how good it turns out, it’s about that they learn something, that they have fun, and it might inspire them in art.”

Marshall said offering an art class as part of outdoor school is “awesome” because it allows students to visualize landscapes they can see before them.

Newtonson added the watercolor class also gives students something tangible to take home with them to remember the experience.

“They’re making memories they’ll keep,” Newtonson said. “It’s really fun to see the ones that are more shy open up. It’s just a really great experience.”

Related Stories