Breaking the mold at Outdoor School

Program's most successful difference might not be the outdoors

The sixth graders clump together in the hushed damp forest around a plant. Using a dichotomous key and the help of 16-year-old Student Leader Karmen Clark, they quickly deduce that the plant is a deer fern.

“I want to give you all high fives,” says Clark, whose camp name is Paprika. “You are officially scientists because you made a really good observation.”

This is Outdoor School at Camp Howard, near Corbett in the Mount Hood National Forest. Thanks to new legislation, every Oregon student will now get this experience at a camp near them — about 55,000 fifth or sixth graders every year. That also means several thousand high school students will gain experience as Student Leaders — teaching the younger generation about plants, animals, soil and water right at the source.

See related story: Outdoor School funding may appear on the ballot

These far-flung camp-like settings have often popped up since the 1960s out of sheer desire, but now the Oregon State University Extension Service will have a hand in developing standards, curriculum and coordination between sites.

Dan Prince, coordinator of Outdoor School through Multnomah Education Service District, says his program handles 7,000 kids through five sites for six weeks every fall and eight weeks every spring. Prince says he is continuously hearing about the positive impact this typically week-long experience has on students — even the ones who went decades ago.

“In some cases, it’s easier to do the learning because it’s so fresh and new,” he says. “There's that element of fun always right there.”

But, surprisingly, Prince says his biggest challenges don’t have to do with the remote locations or the rustic facilities. In many ways, his biggest challenge — even without a classroom — is classroom management.
“Some of the kids have never spent a night away from home,” he says. “There’s 7,000 kids so there’s 7,000 different kinds of needs.”

Prince says he continuously counsels his staff of 67 and the rotating cast of high school helpers to check in with students to make sure they are getting their basic needs met.

“Opening with empathy is super effective for a lot of kids,” he says.

While behavior and interpersonal management is a big part of the hardship of Outdoor School, breaking down social barriers is a big part of the benefits.

Prince says that if he ever goes for his doctorate, he would want to study the interplay between social learning and science learning. He says watching students break down social barriers while simultaneously building up scientific knowledge is a phenomenon he’s seen repeatedly during his 24 years working in Outdoor School.

“I’m not quite sure how it works, but I see it happening,” Prince says.

‘I’ve never touched a tree’

Outdoor School busts apart other traditional school philosophies, too. In a setting ill-suited to textbooks, pens and paper, students who aren’t good at that stuff can suddenly come alive.

“We do hardly any text here,” Prince says. “Just relying on our own observations to be successful.”

David Douglas School District science teacher Cheryl Bland says the science her kids learn at Outdoor School sticks because it is hands-on.

“(In a classroom) my kids don’t have access to the things they do here — the tools of a scientist,” the Ron Russell Middle School teacher says, adding: “It changes their relationship with place. I had a student say yesterday, ‘I’ve never touched a tree.’”

Bland says she often has to rely on her students’ imagination in class to describe a concept.

“Out here, every one of my students has had a common experience,” she says. Bland also says the shared experience gives her students, who are on the cusp of the tumultuous teenage years, an opportunity to reinvent themselves or solidify friendships.

But she worries her district isn’t making Outdoor School a high enough funding priority. David Douglas students get three days, as does Parkrose, but Portland Public Schools, Reynolds and Riverdale students get a full week — five nights and six days.

Bland, who is on her 18th trip to Outdoor School and a staunch advocate for the program, says she herself hated Outdoor School until the third day of her sixth-grade trip.
“Midway in a full week is kind of a magic time,” she says. “We just got here last night and we are already talking about leaving. The friendships aren’t necessarily as strong.”

An effort through the political action committee Outdoor School for All is attempting to earmark $22 million in state funding to bolster districts. (See below.)

Chad Bullard, a Ron Russell 12-year-old, says he goes camping with his family, but Outdoor School showed him creatures he didn’t know existed and careers he might consider.

But even Bullard talks about the social and emotional aspects of the experience more than the science.

“It feels weird to wake up at school,” he says. “I thought it was going to be a bad thing, but it wasn’t. I got here and I had a lot of fun.”

He adds that science class indoors never feels this interesting. “It’s giving me that tingling feeling,” he says.

OUTDOOR SCHOOL INITIATIVE

Outdoor School for All is already fundraising for an initiative petition drive to get on the November 2016 ballot.

At kick-off events in October, leader and spokesman Rex Burkholder said the political action committee raised about $12,000.

“People are very interested and they’re supportive of this,” Burkholder says. “I’m blown away by the interest and excitement from people of all walks of life on this one.”

The group, working closely with the Oregon Outdoor Education Coalition and Friends of Outdoor School, wants to find a way to secure $22 million in state funding for the program. Burkholder says they would rather do that through the governor’s budget or through the Legislature, but they are filing initiative petition paperwork as insurance.

Burkholder says Outdoor School is a great opportunity for hands-on science, but also comes to students just at the time in their development when they are defining themselves and thinking about the future.

“The middle school experience has a huge impact on whether they stay in high school,” he says. “This (Outdoor School) is one of these things — the very few things we have in our society — that transform kids’ lives.”

Burkholder says the Outdoor School type of learning sticks.

“Educators will tell you: the way people learn stuff — much more than being told what to do — is actually doing it,” he says, noting people come to him years after their trip with stories. “Some of them, like my kids, are like: ‘It rained the whole damn time. But, yeah, I do remember about the water cycle.’”

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