

WA House bill would expand outdoor education statewide

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📷 1 of 7 | Students and instructors climb up the Forest Canopy Tower at IslandWood on Bainbridge Island on Feb. 2, just one of the activities students participate in at the School Overnight Program they are attending. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

By [Sarah Kahle](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

OLYMPIA — For many Washingtonians, a week spent learning in the forest is a treasured elementary school memory.

Outdoor education programs originated in Washington state, with the opening of an outdoor school near Ellensburg in 1939, according to [Outdoor Schools Washington](#), an organization founded in 2021 to work with the state’s public instruction officials to increase opportunities for residential outdoor programs.

The learning model has since expanded across the country, but access to these programs is far from equitable.

A bill passed out of the Washington House in a 92-6 vote Saturday aims to extend outdoor school programs to all fifth and sixth graders in the state. It now heads to the Senate.

[House Bill 2078](#) would establish the Outdoor Education Experiences Program, to support the development of outdoor programs, as well as provide opportunities for high school counselors. It would also create the Outdoor Learning Grant Program, which would allocate grants to school districts and outdoor school providers.

The statewide outdoor education initiative comes after almost two years of virtual learning, and as [test scores are dropping](#) and young people are experiencing record rates of burnout and [mental health issues](#).

“COVID has certainly shown us that students, among others, need outlets. They need to get outdoors, they need to have some recreation, they need to smell the fresh air,” said Sen. Sam Hunt, D-Olympia, the prime sponsor of the Senate version of the bill, [SB 5925](#).

But HB 2078 offers students more than just a way to reconnect with nature throughout the isolation of the pandemic. Outdoor learning has been shown to have huge developmental benefits, from improving social and emotional skills to fostering community and connectedness. Learning in nature also helps students develop

curiosity and an appreciation for the scientific processes of our environment, the bill's supporters say.

"I've seen time and time again kids who struggle in the inside four walls of a classroom get outside, learning out in nature, and their eyes light up," said the House bill's prime sponsor, Rep. Alicia Rule, D-Blaine.

If approved, the bill would make available funds to allocate grants starting next school year for school districts to increase their ability to access outdoor programs, as well as competitive grants for outdoor school providers to increase the capacities of their facilities. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction estimates it would cost \$22.5 million annually to send students on a three-day outdoor education trip, and \$35 million for five-day experiences.

The bill's two programs would receive partial funding from the \$10 million of federal American Rescue Plan money allocated to OSPI to support pandemic-related learning loss.

The [Washington State Outdoor School Study](#), requested by the state Legislature and reported by Western Washington University's Center for Economic and Business Research, found inequity in students' access to outdoor schools. It also found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefited from outdoor programs the most, and that universal access to state-funded programs would reduce financial barriers and increase attendance.

According to outdoor educators, and backed by the study, the biggest hurdles to expanding outdoor education access are programs' capacity limits and a lack of resources. School districts pay programs for their students to come visit, but they are often funded directly by parents, whether through PTAs or trip fees. It can also fall on the shoulders of individual teachers or principals to be determined enough to ensure their schools participate in outdoor programs.

Resources vary across Washington's geographic boundaries as well.

Some of the bill's advocates hope to cross-pollinate the state with elementary schoolers, by sending children from the coast to learn about agriculture and inland environments, and students from Eastern Washington to learn about the oceans and forests.

Megan Karch, legislative co-chair of the Washington Outdoor School Coalition and CEO of IslandWood, an outdoor camp on Bainbridge Island, said school districts across the

state should also invest in the outdoor programs right in their own communities.

“What we’re looking for is to create outdoor education as a must-have, not a nice-to-have,” Karch said.

The legislation takes inspiration from Oregon’s statewide outdoor education program. In 2016, voters approved a [ballot measure](#) to set aside funds from the state’s lottery program to provide all Oregon fifth and sixth graders, including home-schooled students, with a week of outdoor learning.

Rex Burkholder, who led the Oregon initiative, spoke to lawmakers Jan. 25 in favor of Washington’s [SB 5925](#). According to Burkholder, before the pandemic hit, up to 97% of eligible Oregon students were participating in outdoor programs — reflecting what he says is robust support from parents and educators.

Hilary Franz became Washington commissioner of public lands in part, she said, because of her own childhood experiences with outdoor education that inspired a lifelong love of nature. In her testimony for both versions of the bill, she pointed out another benefit to increasing students’ access to their environment.

“We are finding it harder and harder every single year to be able to hire the experts and scientists that we need ... everything from marine science to our foresters, even our wildfire and our forest health experts,” Franz said. “The more we can be creating that pipeline and that passion, at an early age, the easier it will be.”

Sarah Kahle: skahle@seattletimes.com;

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