

INTERIM REPORT ON OUTDOOR SCHOOL IN OREGON

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Since the [first Outdoor School in Oregon took place near Medford in 1957](#), thousands of students from across the state have had the opportunity to participate in this unique learning opportunity. Though the characteristics of Outdoor School vary widely from one program to the next, all use the outdoors as their classroom, giving students the opportunity for a unique hands-on learning experience that allows them to deepen their learning on a range of topics, including natural sciences, social studies, language arts, and more.

Over the last 60 years, Oregon schools and school districts have been the main drivers behind Outdoor School programs. Many have made significant commitments of time, money, and resources to ensure their students have the ability to participate in Outdoor School. Other schools and districts, however, have struggled, especially in times of lean budgets, to offer their students what can be a costly program.

With the [passage of Measure 99 in 2016](#) by a two-thirds majority, the state of Oregon is now authorized to use money from the state lottery to provide funds that enable all fifth and/or sixth graders to attend a week-long Outdoor School program.

With major changes on the horizon, this report offers a snapshot of the state of Outdoor School in Oregon today. What follows is a first look at the data being collected as part of a project that is the first of its kind to gain a comprehensive understanding of the state of Outdoor School in Oregon. The final report, due to be released in late 2017, will cover a range of topics. This interim report offers an in-progress analysis of a few of the questions that will form part of the final report, including:

- The number and location of schools that currently participate in Outdoor School
- The length of Outdoor School programs
- Interest among schools that don't currently participate in Outdoor School in doing so in the future
- Familiarity among school officials with Measure 99

Overall, the preliminary analyses show high rates of participation in Outdoor School across Oregon. Schools appear to value the type of learning that can be gained through making the outdoors their classroom. Among schools that do not currently participate in Outdoor School, many have a strong interest in beginning to do so. But a lack of clarity about the specifics of Measure 99 funding appear to be spilling over into their planning process, with many uncertain about when they might want to start programs and what requirements might need to be met in order to receive state funding.

Methodology

Data for this report comes a variety of sources. A comprehensive database of 1149 schools that serve fifth or sixth graders was developed by combining the [Oregon Department of Education data on public schools](#) (including traditional public schools and charter schools) with the United States [Department of Education Office of Non-Public Education data on private schools](#).

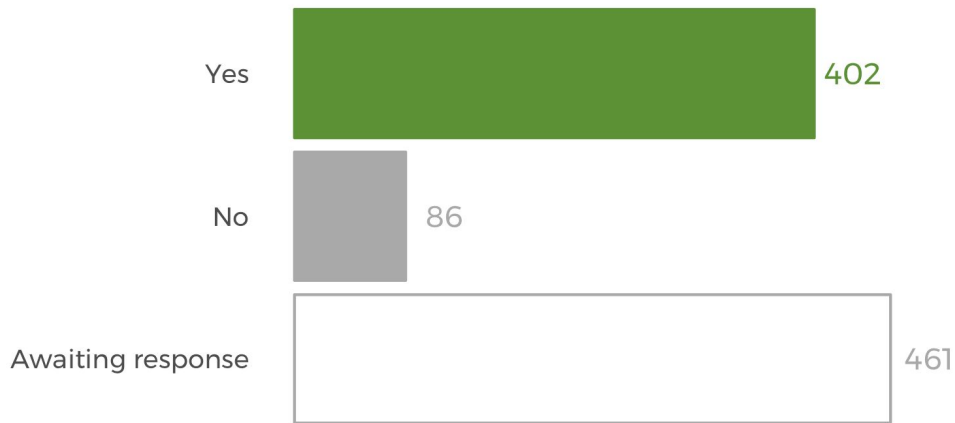
In the spring of 2017, all schools were contacted by email to ask them to complete a survey providing information about their Outdoor School participation. Further data about Outdoor School participation comes from camps that host programs as well as providers (the Multnomah Education Service District Outdoor School program, for instance) that offer curriculum and other support. As of mid-June, at least partial data is available for 674 schools. Data on the remaining schools will be collected over the next several months and incorporated into the final report.

For the purposes of this report, the exact definition of “Outdoor School” and whether any programming schools did in 2016-2017 counted as such was left open to schools themselves to determine. Given this, large differences exist in the length, nature, and other characteristics of Outdoor School programs reported on below. The final report will delve more deeply into these issues.

Outdoor School Programs

Of the schools for which at least partial data is available, 402 reported participating in Outdoor School in the 2016-2017 academic year while 86 said they did not¹. While an impressive 82 percent of schools say they currently participate, it is important to note that we are more likely to have received data from schools that are engaged with Outdoor School than from those that are not. We are still in the process of collecting responses from 461 schools.

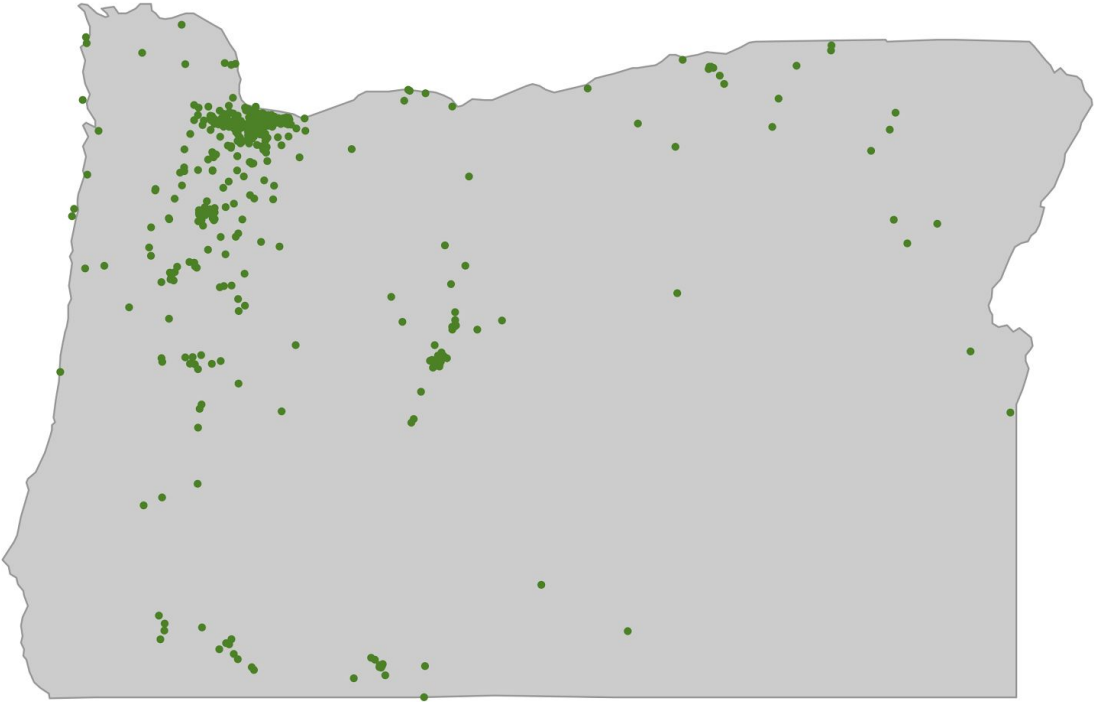
Schools that **PARTICIPATED IN OUTDOOR SCHOOL** in 2016-2017



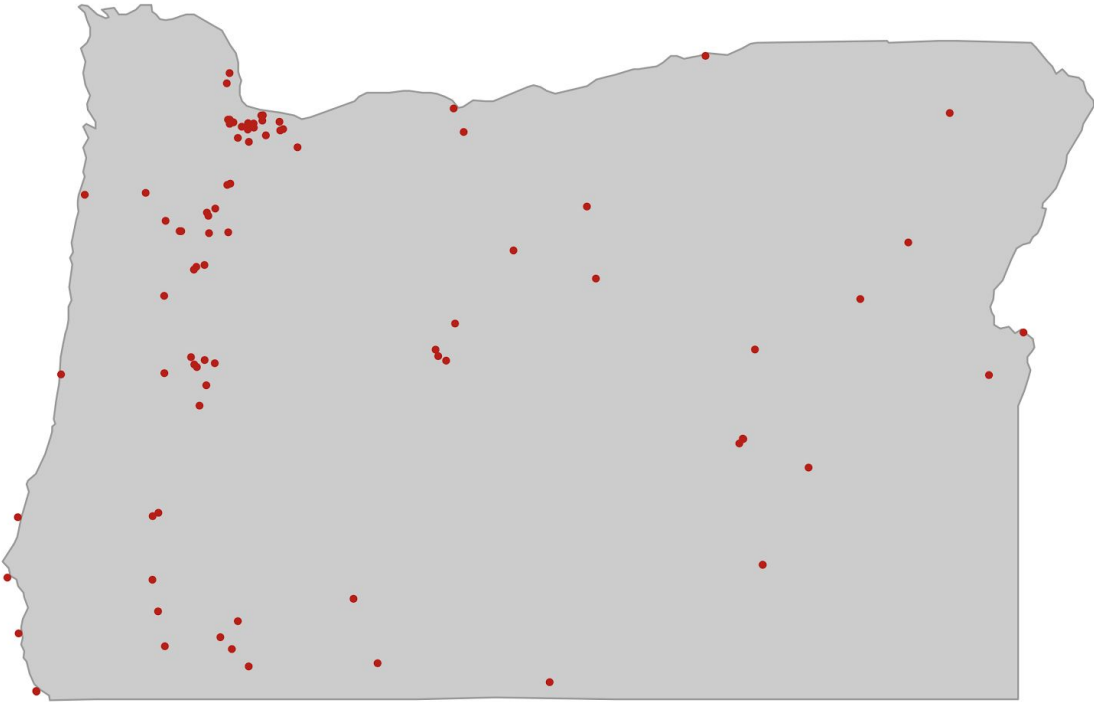
Schools that participate in Outdoor School come from all parts of the state. With a significant percentage of the state’s population concentrated in the Portland metro area, it is no surprise to see a large cluster of schools in that region that participate in Outdoor School. The two maps on the next page show schools that participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 (in green) as well as those that did not (in red).

¹ An additional 200 schools for which we have data are not included in this and other analyses in this report because, while their students do not participate in Outdoor School, their “sister school” (i.e. the feeder school they send students to or receive students from) does.

Schools that HAD OUTDOOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS in 2016-2017



Schools that DID NOT HAVE OUTDOOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS in 2016-2017

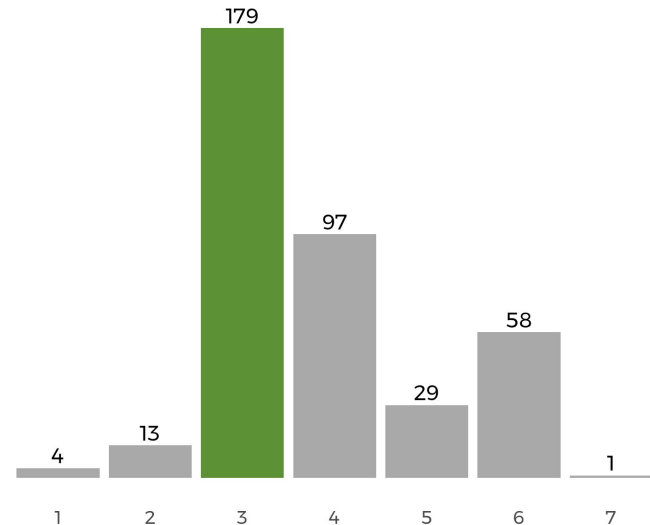


Among schools that participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017, the length of their programs ranges from one day to seven days, with three days the most common response.

Most, though not all, Outdoor School programs involve overnight stays. Of the 382 programs about which we have length information, 370 involve students staying at least one night at the camps where they do Outdoor School. Among these programs, two nights is the most common length.

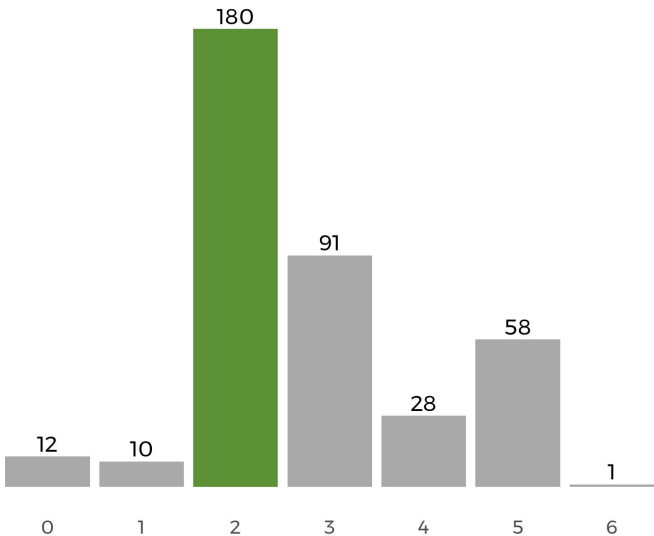
The most common length of Outdoor School programs is **THREE DAYS**

179 schools have three-day programs



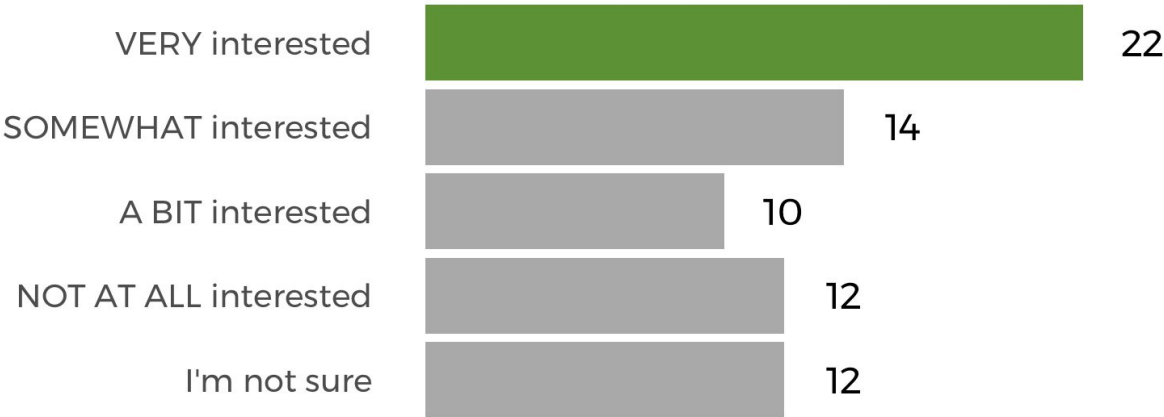
The most common length of Outdoor School programs is **TWO NIGHTS**

180 schools have two-night programs



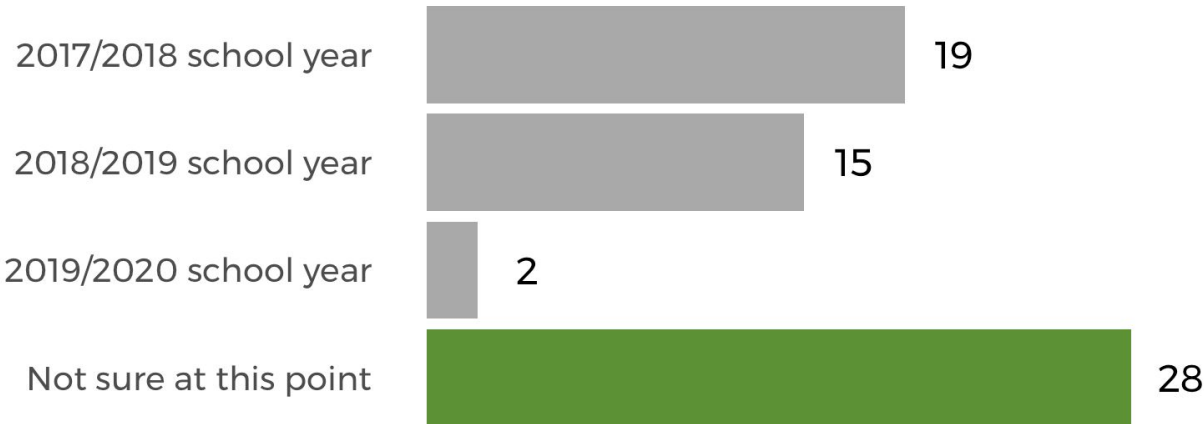
Schools that do not currently participate in Outdoor School were asked about their interest in starting a program in the future. The most common response, from 22 schools, was that they are “very interested.”

Schools without Outdoor School programs are INTERESTED IN STARTING THEM



While schools are interested in starting Outdoor School programs, many are uncertain when exactly they would hope to do so. In response to a question asking when they think their school might be ready to start a program, the most common response was that they were not sure.

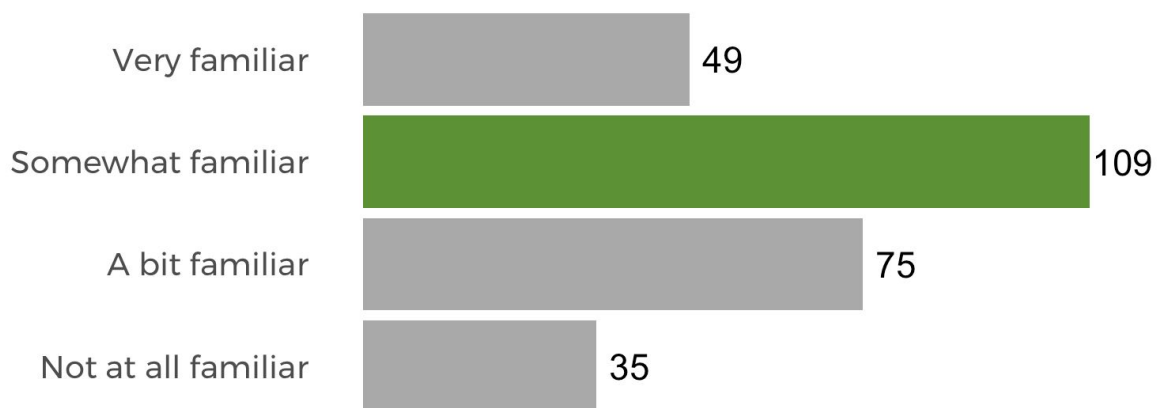
Many schools are NOT SURE when they want to start Outdoor School programs



This uncertainty in the timeframe for starting Outdoor School programs is likely connected to the uncertainty surrounding funding specifics for Measure 99. Asked about their familiarity with Measure 99, the most common response was “somewhat familiar.” That said, there also appears to be a significant lack of knowledge about Measure 99, with only 49 schools (less than 20 percent of the total) saying they were “very familiar” with it.

Many schools say they are **SOMEWHAT FAMILIAR with Measure 99**

But many schools appear less than fully familiar with it



Indeed, in response to a question asking for other feedback about Outdoor School in general, many schools that did not participate in 2016-2017 said that their uncertainty about the possibility of starting a program in the future has to do with two items that Measure 99 is slated to provide: **funding** and **technical assistance**.

Several schools talked about having **eliminated Outdoor School in the past due to budget cuts**. One school wrote:

We have used Outdoor School as a district in the past for a [talented and gifted] program activity. It is always well-received. We did it for about 5 years. We stopped last year as a cost-cutting item. It would be great to bring it back.

One school that is interested in adding a program wrote:

Funding would be the only reason we would not be able to implement an outdoor program.

Many schools expressed the **need for technical assistance** with planning their potential Outdoor School program. An example of this type of response is:

While we really appreciate all the benefits our students receive, it is a lot of work to put together. It would be nice to receive assistance in the form of ideas, presenters and money.

Several small schools expressed an interest in **partnering with similar schools** to jointly conduct Outdoor School programs. One such school wrote:

We are a small school — 50 students total. We'd love to partner with other small schools to make outdoor school affordable / possible for us.

On the flip side, one large school had the opposite problem, with the principal writing:

I would LOVE to send our students to outdoor school - in fact, I am passionate about this issue. However, my school is enormous (1120 students) and I would need help understanding how I could get students (even just one grade level) to outdoor school.

Several other responses identified **challenges to implementing Outdoor School programs**. Many focused on the **length of the programs**. One principal wrote:

An overnight program will probably not work with my teachers.

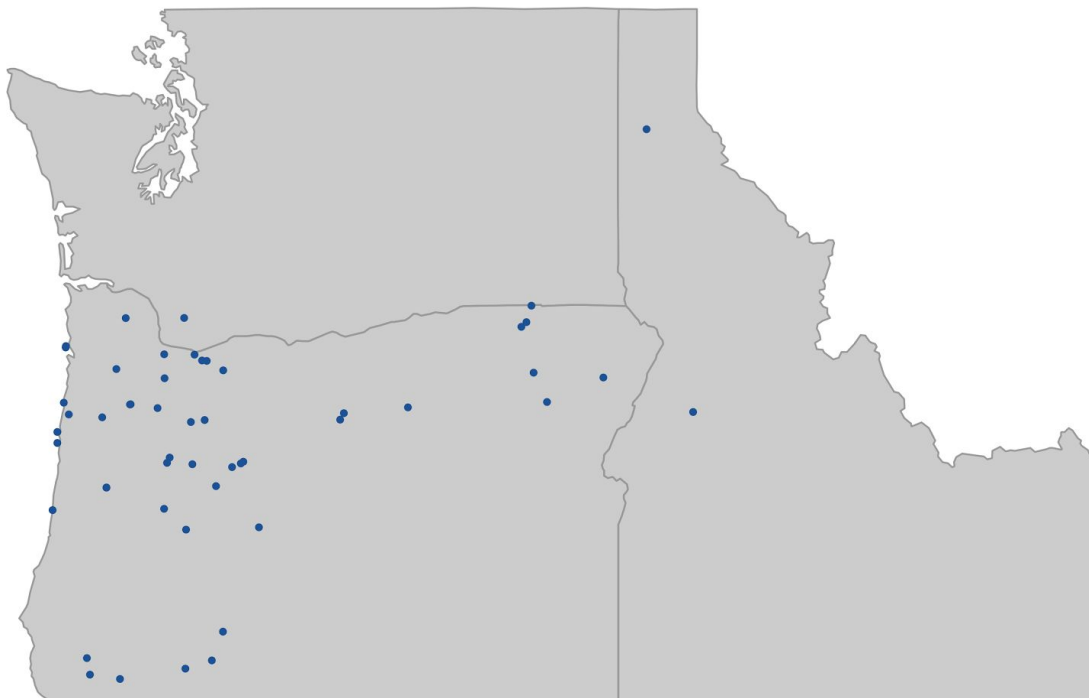
Others said that they foresee challenges if forced to move away from a shorter to a longer program. As a school with an established Outdoor School program put it:

We have been doing a 2-day program at Opal Creek with our 5th Graders for at least 7 years. A 5-day program may be challenging to fit within our curriculum.

Outdoor School Camps

To date, we have identified 51 camps that Oregon schools have used for Outdoor School in the 2016-2017 school year. The majority are in Oregon, of course, though two are in Idaho and one is in Washington. They can be seen on the map below.

CAMPS where Oregon schools participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017



Among camps that hosted Outdoor School in 2016-2017, there was a large range in how many programs they hosted. While some hosted schools nearly every week that weather permitted, others were well below capacity. In email correspondence with camps, several brought up their desire to host more Outdoor School programs, including the two below.

We'd LOVE to see more schools come to Drift Creek, specifically during the week on school days when our facilities otherwise sit empty.

Drift Creek Camp, Lincoln County

We did not have any outdoor schools this past year. We have not hosted any of these specific camps for quite some time. We're open and willing – but it's been a while.

Washington Family Ranch, Wasco County

Conclusion

This report shows a strong interest among schools across Oregon in Outdoor School. A large number already participate in Outdoor School, and many that don't hope to do so in the future. Uncertainty about Measure 99, particularly around the level of funding available and the requirements to receive funding, is reflected in the uncertainty many schools expressed about when they might want to start programs.

As this research gathers data from the remaining schools, a more comprehensive picture will become evident. It is important to remember that the schools yet to be contacted are likely to include a higher percentage of those that do not currently participate in Outdoor School. Yet, with roughly half of the data in, the overall results are almost certain to show a high level of participation in Outdoor School among schools throughout Oregon, and a strong desire among others schools to join their ranks.