

Outdoor School in Oregon

By David Keyes, Ph.D.

November 2017

“All kids need hands-on, fun outdoor experiences that encourage them to take better care of our earth and builds on their interest in the outdoors. The easiest way to ensure kids become passionate about saving and taking care of our earth is to get them to fall in love with it. People don't destroy what they love, they destroy what they don't know.”

— Faith Lindley, Maupin Elementary School



Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	4
Outdoor School Participation	6
Outdoor School Program Characteristics	17
Outdoor School Sites	22
Past and Future Programs	25
Measure 99	30
How do Schools Create Successful Outdoor School Programs?	34
Conclusion	38
Methodology	42

Photos used in this report courtesy of Camp Tamarack, OMSI, ECO, Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership, Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center, St. Andrew Nativity School, and Wallowa Resources



**For more information about this report,
please contact:
Gray Family Foundation
grants@grayff.org
503-552-3500**

Executive Summary

Since the first Outdoor School program in Oregon took place in 1957, schools throughout the state have participated in this unique outdoor education opportunity. When voters approved Measure 99 in 2016, Oregon became the first state in the nation to offer statewide dedicated funding for outdoor education. In 2017, the Oregon state legislature approved \$24 million in funding for the first two years of the program, and applications are currently being accepted from districts throughout the state to fund Outdoor School programs.



As Measure 99 brings about the the beginning of a new era, this report provides a baseline assessment of the state of Outdoor School in Oregon prior to the start of statewide funding. Through a survey of 1135 schools that serve fifth or sixth graders as well as 20 in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and others, this report offers an overview of the past, present, and future of Outdoor School in Oregon.

Key findings

- **In the 2016-2017 school year, over 30,000 students participated in Outdoor School.**
- **493 schools (64 percent¹) currently participate in Outdoor School.**
- **Coos, Douglas, Harney, Malheur, and Wheeler counties have the lowest participation rates. While several counties see 75 percent or more schools participate in Outdoor School, Coos, Douglas, Harney, Malheur, and Wheeler counties have participation rates of 25 percent or less.**
- **High poverty schools are less likely to participate in Outdoor School. While 85 percent of schools with low rates of poverty participate, only 54 percent of high-poverty schools do so.**
- **Ninety-five percent of Outdoor School programs have an academic component that connects to state standards.**
- **The most common length of Outdoor School programs is three days and two nights.**
- **Outdoor School programs were held at 38 sites in 2016-2017, the vast majority of which were in northwestern and central Oregon. There is a well-developed Outdoor School infrastructure in Northwestern and Central Oregon, but Southwestern and Eastern Oregon have far less access.**
- **Most Outdoor School programs have existed for 10 years or less.**
- **Successful Outdoor School programs receive multilevel support from teachers, administrators, districts, and communities.**
- **Over half of schools that do not currently participate in Outdoor School are very or somewhat interested in starting programs.**
- **At the time of survey administration in spring 2017, there was significant confusion among schools about Measure 99. Many were unclear about the requirements to apply for funds, and were particularly unclear about the role of Oregon State University Extension Service.**

¹ Of the 1135 schools in the database, schools with a sister school that participates in Outdoor Schools, schools that didn't respond, and schools that did not participate in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 but have substantial outdoor education programming were not included in any of the analyses. The total number of schools included after these schools were dropped was 776. For further details, see the methodology section.

Introduction

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 programs vary widely, 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.

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 or sixth graders to attend a week-long Outdoor School program. In summer 2017, the state legislature authorized \$24 million over two years for Outdoor School program. Oregon State University Extension Service has been designated as the manager of these funds, and has begun to accept Outdoor School funding applications from school districts in fall 2017.

Using data collected through a survey of 1135 schools as well as twenty in-depth interviews, this report offers a baseline assessment of the state of Outdoor School in 2017, addressing multiple questions related to Outdoor School in the state.

The extent and nature of Outdoor School participation is addressed through the following questions:

- How many schools participate?
- How many students participate and in which grades?
- How many days and nights do programs last?
- Which camps do schools attend?
- Do programs have an academic component, and does the academic component connect to state standards?
- Who develops the curriculum that schools use?
- Who staffs programs?
- Are schools able to make accommodations to ensure that all students can attend?
- How long have programs existed?

Among **schools that do not have current Outdoor School programs**, this report addresses the following questions:

- When did schools last participate?
- Which camps did they previously attend?
- Why did they stop participating?
- How interested are they in starting programs, and when might they hope to do so?

In addition, the report addresses two questions related to **Measure 99**:

- How familiar are schools with Measure 99?
- How familiar are schools with the role that Oregon State University Extension Service plays in funding Outdoor School programs?

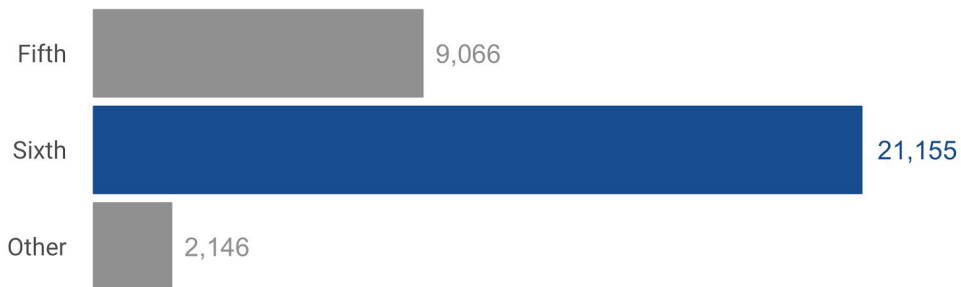
With major changes on the horizon, this report offers a snapshot of the state of Outdoor School in Oregon today. At a time when changes are imminent, it offers a sense of where Outdoor School is today, and where it might go in the future.

Outdoor School Participation

In the 2016-2017 school year, 32,367 students were identified as participating in Outdoor School. The majority of those who participated were in sixth grade.

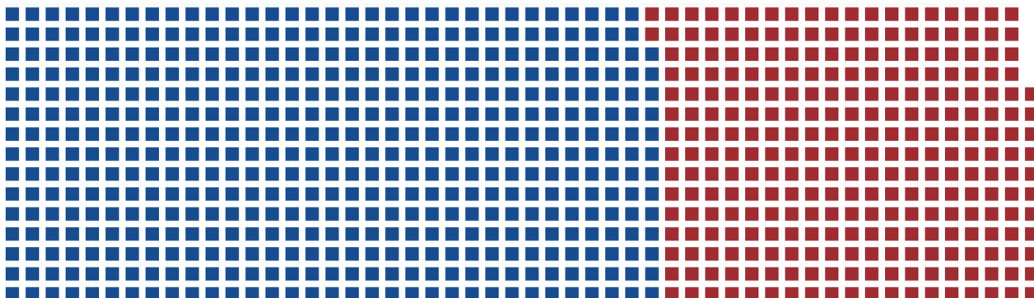
Of the schools about which we have information, 493 participated while 283 did not. This means that 64 percent of schools participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017.

Most students who participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 were in sixth grade



493 schools (64 percent of the total) participated in Outdoor School

Each dot represents one school. Blue dots are schools that participated, red dots are those that did not.



Large schools are slightly more likely to participate in Outdoor School than are small schools



The overall participation rate can be broken down in multiple ways. How do participation rates compare between large schools (defined as those with 500 or more students) and small schools (those with 100 or fewer students)? We can see the difference between the two above: 70 percent of large schools participate in Outdoor School while 66 percent percent of small schools do so.

Both types of schools face challenges. For small schools, the challenges are often around capacity. Principal Kendra Jones at Gaarde Christian School said that planning her school’s Outdoor School program is a challenge in part because of their small size. With only 10 students participating in 2016-2017, the costs of several aspects of their program cannot be spread out over the dozens or hundreds of students that larger schools send.

This is an issue that the rural Dufur School has faced as well. Principal Leo Baptiste said, “We know Condon already has a program set up that is done in conjunction with other schools. It would be great if we could join forces as small schools and do a nice big program together.” Indeed, this type of cooperation among small schools is what has helped six small schools² in Linn and Benton Counties to partner together to conduct a joint Outdoor School program for the last 26 years.

Large schools face challenges as well. Jennie Madland, principal of Stephens Middle School in Salem, wrote: “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

² Hamilton Creek Elementary School (Lebanon), Lacombe School(Lebanon), Monroe Grade School (Monroe), Scio Middle School (Scio), Zion Lutheran School (Corvallis), and Alsea Elementary School (Alsea)

students (even just one grade level) to Outdoor School.” There probably wouldn’t be a site that could accommodate all of her sixth graders at one time, she surmised. And sending them in groups would present scheduling challenges for the students and teachers who remained in school at any given time. As a result of these challenges, and in spite of her desire to be involved, her school does not currently participate in Outdoor School.

Private schools are more likely to participate in Outdoor School than are public schools



We can also break down overall participation rates by school governance. While 61 percent of public schools sent their students to Outdoor School in 2016-2017, 73 percent of private schools did so.

The reasons for this difference, relatively small though it may be, remain less than fully clear. There are some large school districts in Oregon with low levels of participation (in Eugene 4J, for example, only 32 percent of schools participated in 2016-2017), which may have a significant impact on the overall numbers.

There are, of course, also barriers to participation among private schools, many of which are religious in nature. For instance, Maayan Torah Day School in Portland expressed interest in starting an Outdoor School program. However, to make this feasible, there would need to be kosher food, girls would have to be able to attend in long skirts, and no work or play could be done on Saturdays.

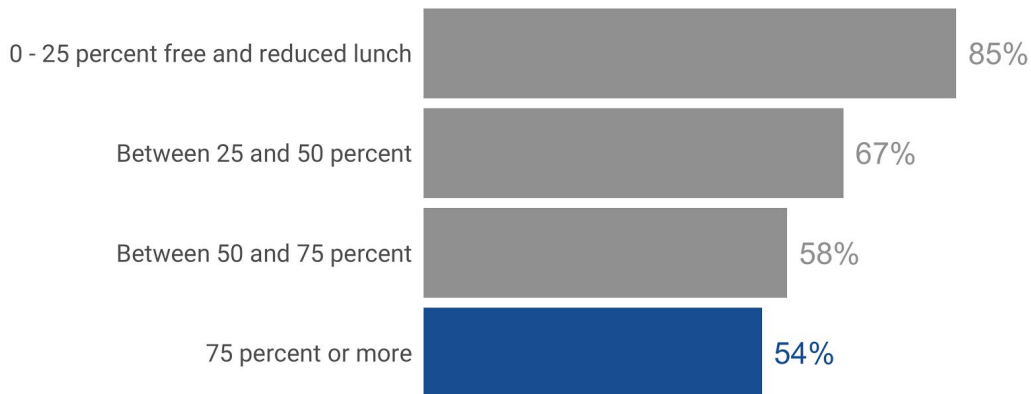
Outdoor School participation rates are nearly equal across all schools, regardless of race



In addition to school size and governance, it is possible to break down Outdoor School participation in many other ways. For example, is there a relationship between participation rates and the racial diversity of schools? As we can see, the differences in Outdoor School between schools with varying racial makeups are minimal. Nearly an identical percentage of schools 75 percent or more white students participate in Outdoor School as do schools less than 25 percent white students (62 percent of the former, 61 percent of the latter), and there are only very small differences in the participation rate for the remaining schools.

This finding is likely largely explained by the fact that several of the state’s most racially diverse districts, located in the Portland Metro area (including, most notably, Portland Public Schools), send nearly all of their students to Outdoor School.

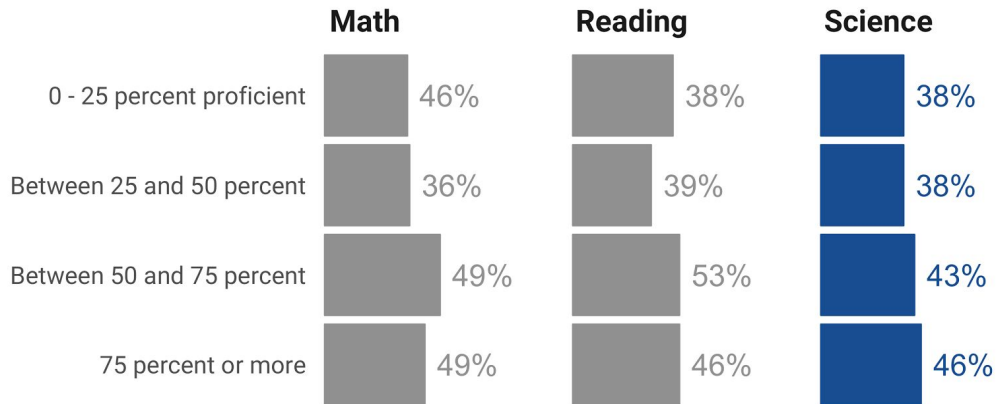
High-poverty schools are less likely to participate in Outdoor School



While differences do not exist between schools broken down by their racial makeup, there are clear differences in Outdoor School participation rates between schools depending on the percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch (a measure often used as a proxy for poverty). While 85 percent of schools with less than 25 percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch (that is, affluent schools) participate in Outdoor School, 54 percent of schools with 75 percent or more students receiving free and reduced lunch do so.

Up to this point, schools have been on their own to decide whether or not to participate in Outdoor School. Many schools have done so by relying on families to pay, at least in part, for the programs. Schools with high rates of students who receive free and reduced lunch are unlikely to be able to rely on this financial support from families. This, combined with the fact that few schools have been able to rely upon district-level financial support for Outdoor School, likely explains why schools with more students who receive free and reduced lunch participate in Outdoor School at lower rates.

Schools with higher rates of proficiency on statewide science tests are more likely to participate in Outdoor School



A fifth way to examine the data on Outdoor School participation is by looking at test scores. Is there a relationship between rates of student proficiency on state exams in math, reading, and science and participation in Outdoor School?

As we can see above, the pattern for math and reading assessments is unclear. That is, there is not a clear association between increased rates of proficiency on these exams and increased likelihood of participating in Outdoor School.

However, there is a clear association between schools that have higher rates of proficiency on state science exams and Outdoor School participation. Among schools with the lowest rates of proficiency (0 to 25 percent), 38 percent send students to Outdoor School. The percent remains the same for schools with 25 to 50 percent proficiency before steadily increasing for schools with higher rates of proficiency. For schools between 50 and 75 percent proficiency, the Outdoor School participation rate is 43 percent. Among schools with the highest rates of proficiency (75 percent or more), 46 percent participate in Outdoor School.

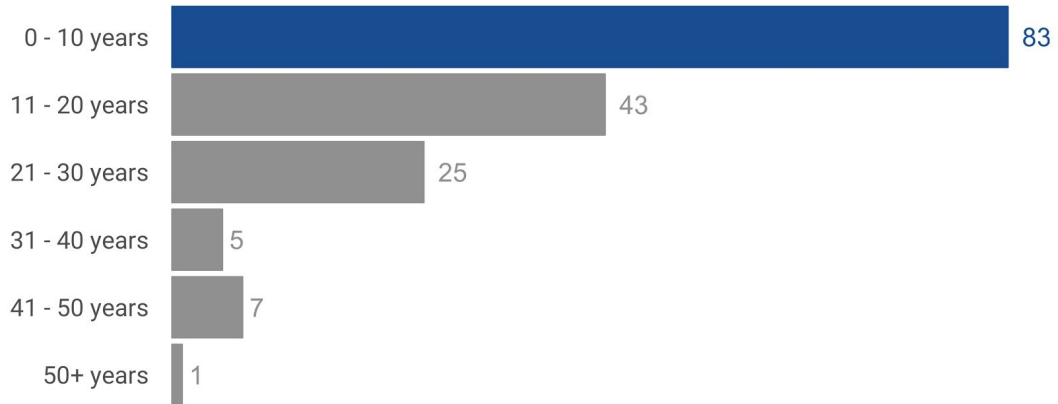
This raises an important question: does participation in Outdoor School lead to higher rates of proficiency on state science exams? While the available data does not allow us to attribute causation (the situation may actually be the reverse: schools that have high-quality science instruction are more likely to participate in Outdoor School), several teachers and administrators interviewed believe there is a link.

Katrina Scott, a fifth grade teacher at Lookingglass Elementary School in Roseburg, has seen her students go from a 50 percent passing rate on state science assessments to over 80 percent in three years of Outdoor School participation. She attributes this jump to the school's Outdoor School program, saying that it helps students to engage with science materials in ways they hadn't previously. Students who previously did not see the application of science material discussed in the classroom are now able to make connections and are engaged in their learning as a result. As she put it, "academically, it has a huge impact on them buying into what I'm selling."

“Academically, [Outdoor School] has a huge impact on [students] buying into what I’m selling.”

At Grandhaven Elementary School in McMinnville, the story that principal Margie Johnson and fifth grade teacher Beth Fuhrer tell highlights the impact of Outdoor School even more directly. Students at Grandhaven, 68 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch and 30 percent of whom are English language learners, took the state science assessments prior to attending Outdoor School in spring 2017. As principal Johnson put it, "our scores were not stellar. We knew we had work to do." Because the science assessments can be given twice to fifth graders, the school decided to repeat them after their Outdoor School program. After a three-day, two-night program at Camp Gray that was, as Fuhrer described it, "jam-packed with learning experiences," students returned and took the science assessments again. The results showed a 40 percent increase in the passing rate. Both Johnson and Fuhrer described themselves as "surprised" at how immediate and significant the increase was. They attribute it to the strength of the OMSI-run program and hope to continue to attend this program in the future.

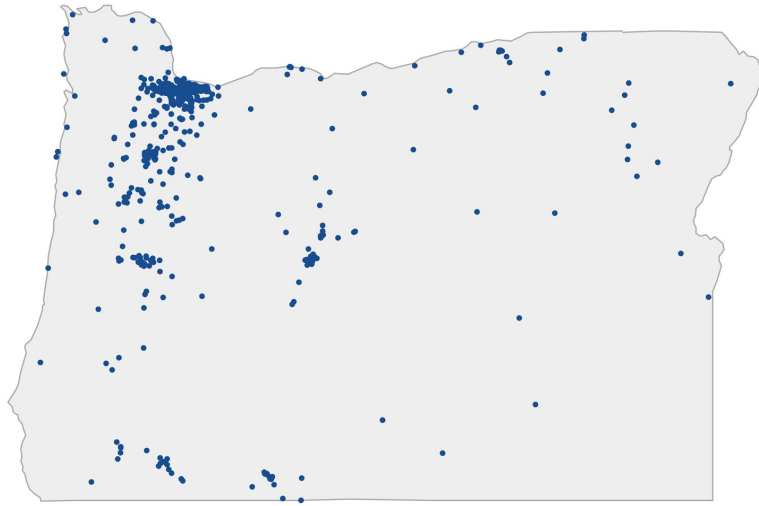
Most Outdoor School programs have existed for ten years or less



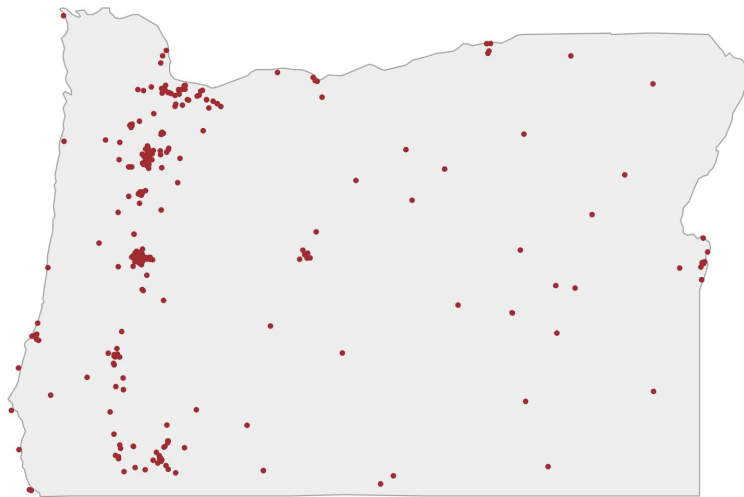
Sixty years on from the state’s first Outdoor School program in 1957, many schools have now participated for many years. Some have done so for several decades. Schools contacted as part of this project were asked to report how long their Outdoor School programs have existed. While there is some uncertainty about the precision of their responses (there were many at multiples of 10, indicating a degree of estimation), the overall picture shows that most programs have existed for a decade or less, though a significant number have existed for longer.



Schools that PARTICIPATED in Outdoor School in 2016-2017

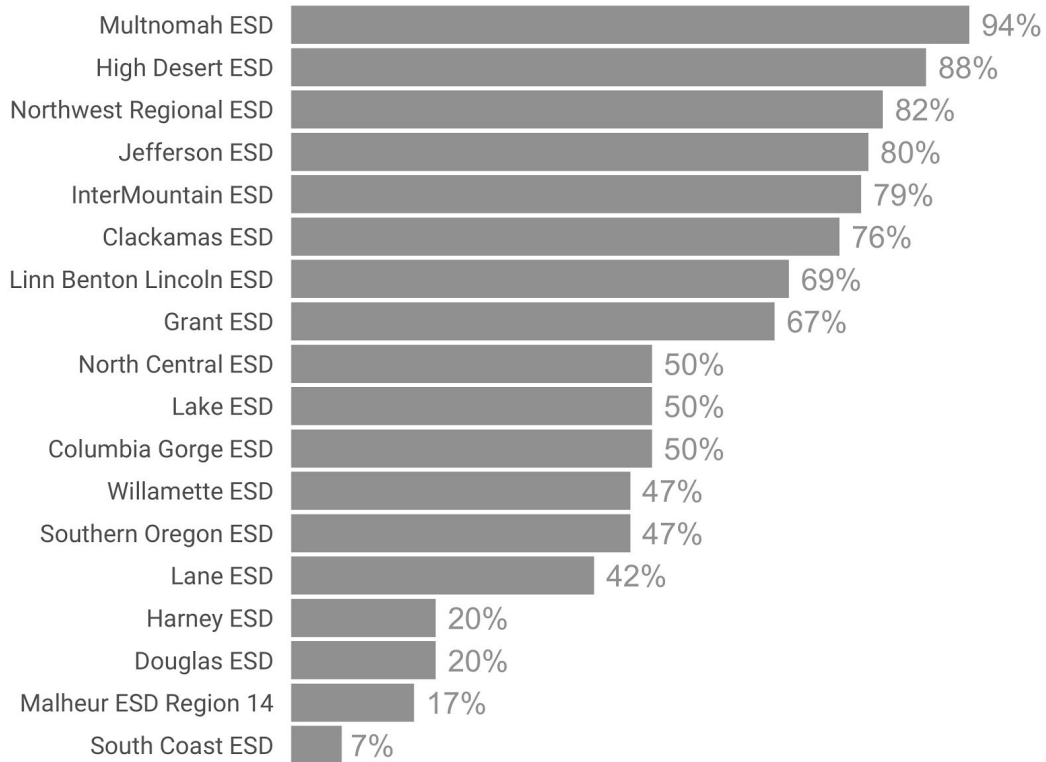


Schools that DID NOT PARTICIPATE in Outdoor School in 2016-2017



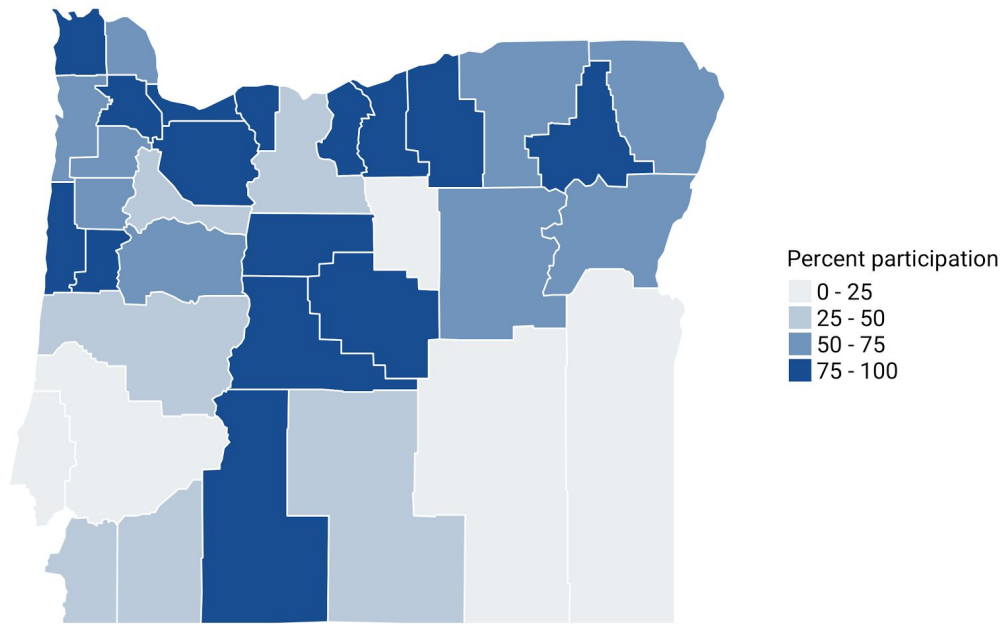
How does Outdoor School participation vary across Oregon? The maps above show that there are schools in all parts of the state that participated — and did not participate — in Outdoor School in 2016-2017. There are hints of some trends here: higher numbers of schools not participating in the southwestern and eastern parts of the state.

There is large variation in Outdoor School participation rates between educational service districts



We can also examine geographic differences by looking at participation rates by educational service district (ESD). While some ESDs have incredibly high participation rates — 94 percent of schools in Multnomah ESD participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 — others have much lower rates. At the low end, South Coast ESD, which serves Coos, Curry and Douglas counties, saw only seven percent of its schools participate.

Outdoor School participation rates vary widely, but in five counties fewer than 25 percent of schools participate

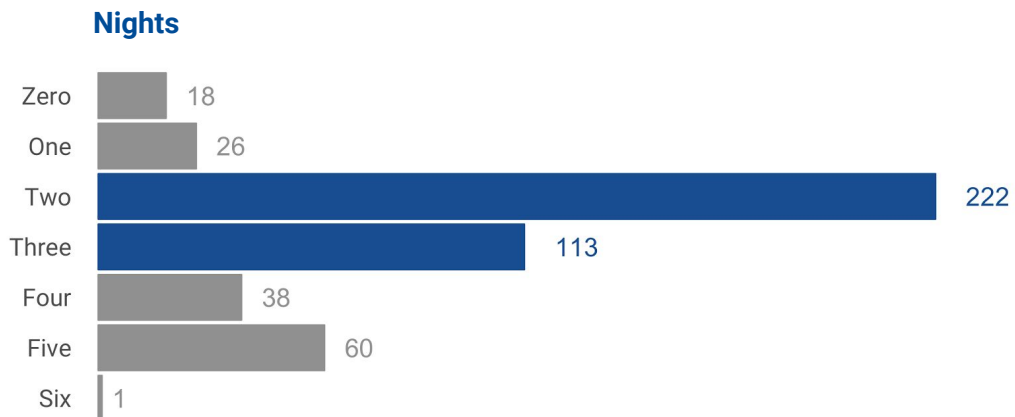
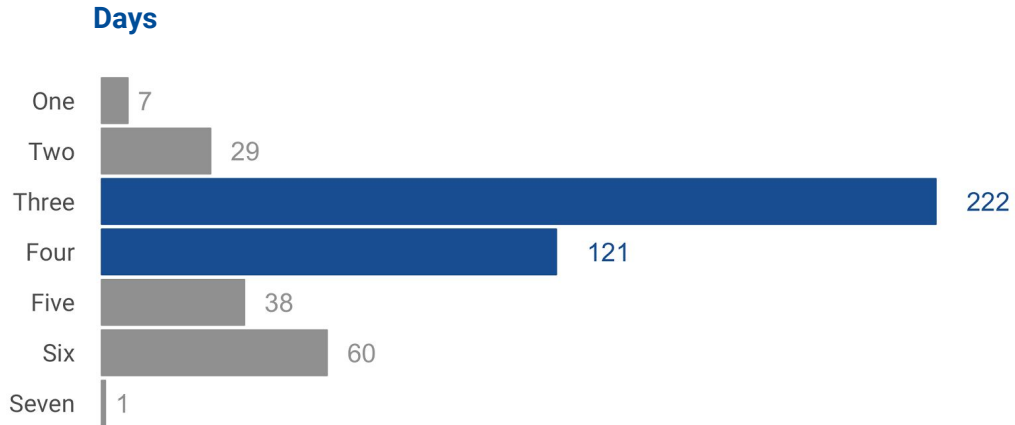


ESDs serve public schools. Adding in private schools, we can examine geographic disparities by looking at participation rates by county. The map above shows the percent of schools in each county that participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017. In several counties, 75 to 100 percent of schools report participating in Outdoor School. However, it is notable that in five counties — Coos, Douglas, Harney, Malheur, and Wheeler — the 2016-2017 Outdoor School participation rate was below 25 percent.

These counties are located in parts of the state with few sites (see sites section below) and few providers of Outdoor School services. In Eastern Oregon, for example, there are few sites and no large providers such as Multnomah ESD to rely on for planning assistance. As a result, schools in this part of the state often have to travel long distances to attend Outdoor School. It is no coincidence that two of the counties (Harney and Malheur) with the lowest Outdoor School participation rates are in Eastern Oregon.

Outdoor School Program Characteristics

Most Outdoor School programs last three or four DAYS and two or three NIGHTS



By far, the most common number of days for Outdoor School programs is three (222 schools have three-day programs), followed by four (121 schools).

While 16 schools reported not having an overnight component to their Outdoor School programs, the vast majority stayed at least one night. The most common program length is two nights (222 schools), followed by three nights (113 schools).

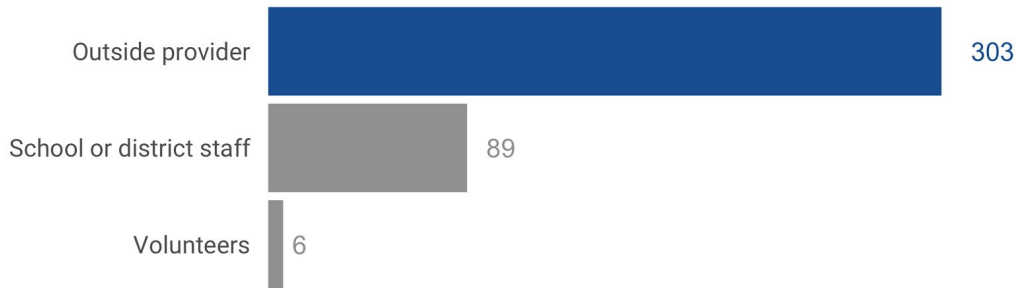
While programs that last three or four days and two or three nights are by far the most common, schools largely decide how long to have their programs last, and they often have particular reasons for choosing the length that they do.

Some schools say that shorter programs are the only realistic way to do Outdoor School in their community. Lisa Callahan, principal of Mabel Rush Elementary School in Newberg said that Outdoor School, “is a great program and needs to be funded at a level that supports all students in attending. Three days is enough though. One whole week would be too much to ask of parent volunteers and teachers who would have to be away from their families, jobs, etc.”



Others feel equally strongly in the opposite direction. Delaney Sharp, head teacher at Black Butte Elementary School in Camp Sherman, is a former Outdoor School instructor. He said that this experience has shown him that “day four is where the magic starts to happen.” After the first two days, students become comfortable and begin to let their guards down. On days four and five, Sharp said, they become fully engaged with the Outdoor School experience.

The curriculum for most Outdoor School programs is developed at least in part by outside providers



One of the major parts of planning Outdoor School programs is curriculum development. Asked who undertakes this task, the most common response was outside providers. This may be the provider that organizes the Outdoor School program as a whole (e.g. Multnomah ESD), but it may also be a smaller organization that assists with parts of the planning. Many schools work with local organizations to develop their curriculum. Local watershed councils, for example, often send representatives to that teach modules about water quality for Outdoor School programs that take place in their regions.

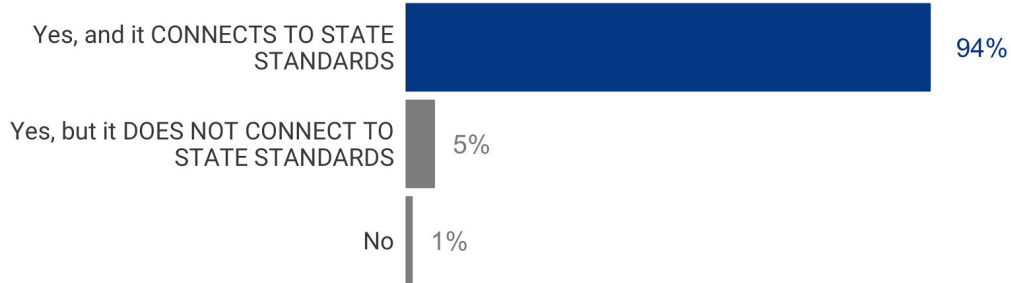
School or district staff are also often involved with the planning of Outdoor School programs. The categories in the figure above are not mutually exclusive, and many Outdoor School programs are planned by a combination of outside providers and school or district staff.

Curriculum development is one of the most time-intensive aspects of planning Outdoor School programs. For schools that plan their own curriculum, this planning process is a serious undertaking, as Outdoor School is, by definition, a very different experience than normal classroom learning.

Schools that rely on outside providers to plan their Outdoor School curriculum free up time to focus on planning the many other pieces involved in development a successful program. For some, taking the curriculum development piece off of teachers' plates is what makes Outdoor School possible. In fact, some teachers expressed amazement at schools that plan their own Outdoor School curriculum. Fifth grade teacher Beth Fuhrer at Grandhaven

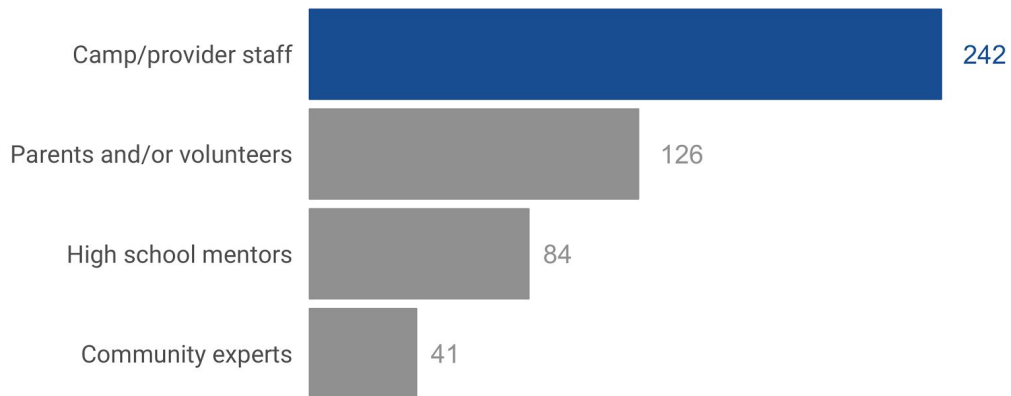
Elementary School in McMinnville said, “I can’t imagine if I had to plan curriculum too.”

Nearly all Outdoor School programs have an academic component



No matter who plans the curriculum, it almost always is strongly connected to what happens in the classroom. Ninety-nine percent of schools said their Outdoor School programs have an academic component, and 94 percent said that this academic component is connected to state standards.

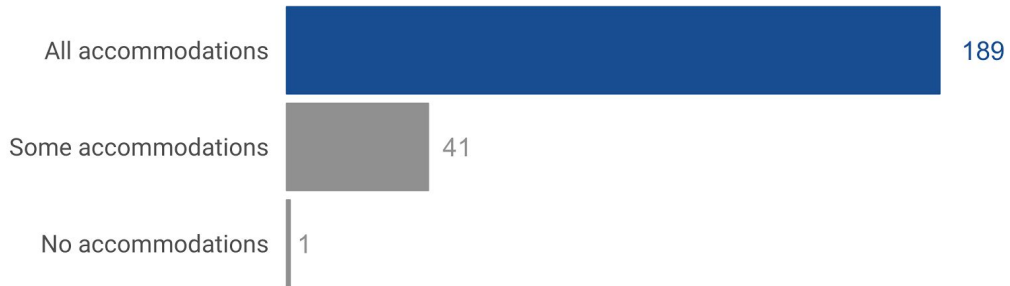
In addition to teachers, camps and providers are the main source of staff for Outdoor School programs



Schools also reported on who staffs their Outdoor School programs (the question that schools responded to specifically asked them to identify staffers in addition to school staff so it should be noted that many teachers and administrators are involved with the staffing of programs, though not included above). In addition to school staff, providers themselves are the main group who fulfill staffing needs, followed by parents and/or volunteers. Almost all programs are staffed by

a combination of all groups. Running Outdoor School programs for students requires the involvement of many adults.

The vast majority of schools make all accommodations necessary to ensure that all students can participate in Outdoor School

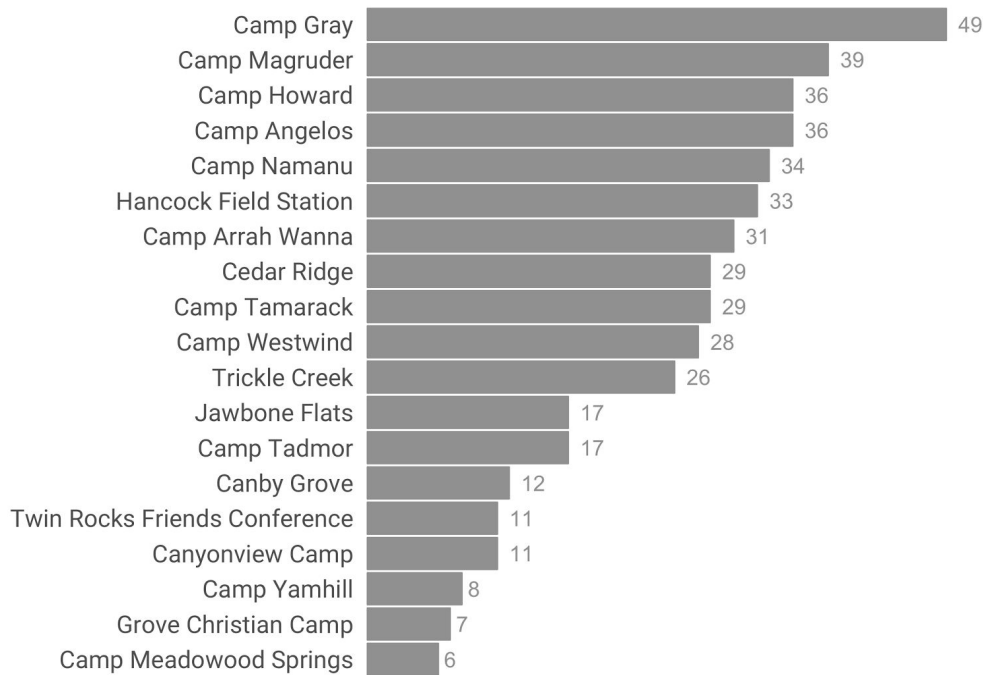


As an experience that, by definition, exists outside of the school building, it can sometimes to be a challenge for schools to ensure that all students, regardless of disabilities, are able to participate in Outdoor School. It is notable, then, that the vast majority of schools (189 of the 231 for whom we have responses) say they make all accommodations necessary to ensure that all students are able to take part.



Outdoor School Sites

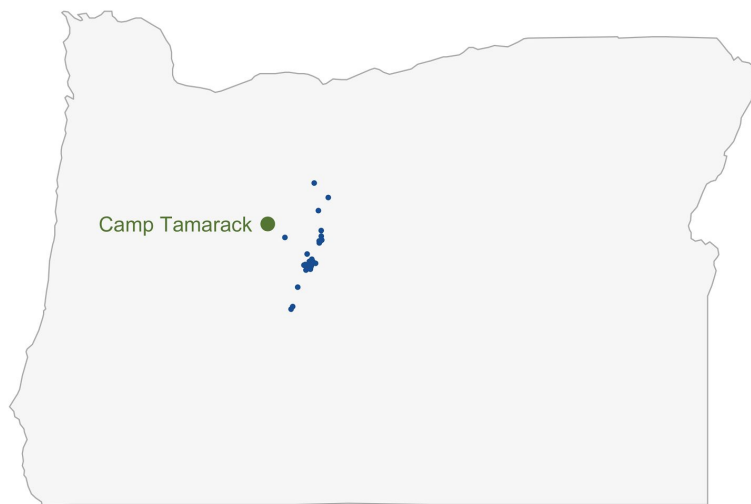
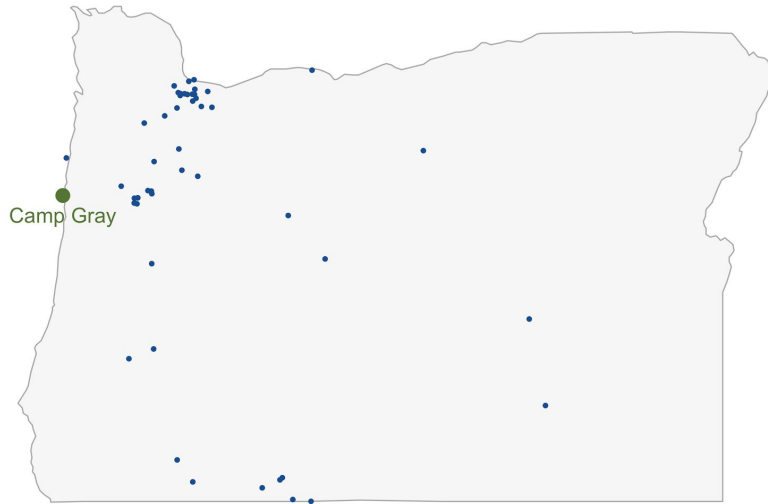
Sites that hosted five or more schools for Outdoor School in 2016-2017



One of the most important decisions in planning Outdoor School programs is which camps to attend. With over a half-century history of Outdoor School, Oregon is now blessed with a multitude of sites that serve schools throughout the state. Some of these sites simply provide space and are often used by providers to host programs (e.g. Camp Howard, used by Multnomah ESD) while others (e.g. Camp Tamarack) offer both camp space and assistance with curriculum development and other aspects of Outdoor School planning.

In 2016-2017, Outdoor School programs were held at 38 sites throughout Oregon. While eight sites hosted only a single school, others hosted many schools. Camp Gray, used by OMSI for its Outdoor School programs, was the most popular, hosting 49 schools in 2016-2017. The figure above shows sites that hosted five or more schools.

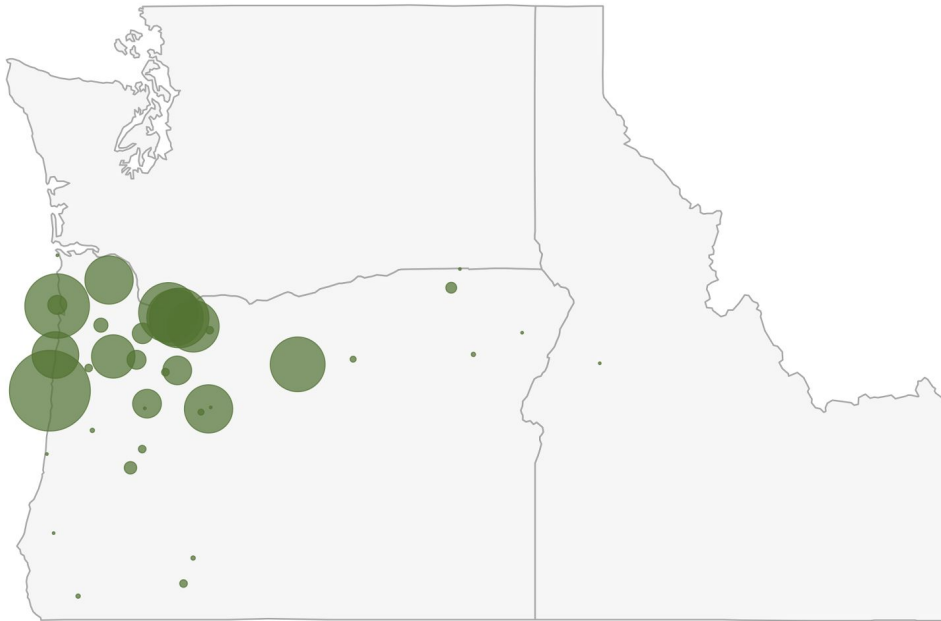
Some sites, such as Camp Gray, host schools from across Oregon while others, such as Camp Tamarack, host mostly nearby schools
Each blue dot represents one school



There is a wide range in terms of the distances that schools travel to attend camps throughout Oregon. An example can be seen in the contrast between Camp Gray and Camp Tamarack. Camp Gray, with its broad popularity, attracts schools from across Oregon. Other sites draw from a smaller geographic area. All of the 29 schools that participated in Outdoor School at the Sisters-based Camp Tamarack are based in Central Oregon.

Sites that host the most schools are concentrated in Northwestern and Central Oregon

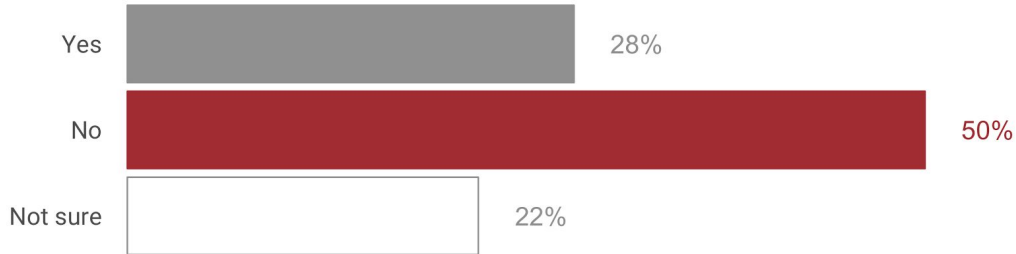
The larger the dot, the more schools the site hosted



Continuing to analyze site usage geographically, the map above shows all sites that Oregon-based schools used for Outdoor School. This map shows that the most popular sites are concentrated in the Northwestern and Central Oregon. Very few Outdoor School programs take place in Southern and Eastern parts of Oregon. This presents a challenge for schools located in these areas. If they want to participate in Outdoor School, they often have to travel many hours to reach sites. Indeed, two schools in Eastern Oregon (Adrian Elementary School and Vale-based Willowcreek Elementary School) travel to McCall Outdoor Science School in Idaho because it is the most convenient site given their location.

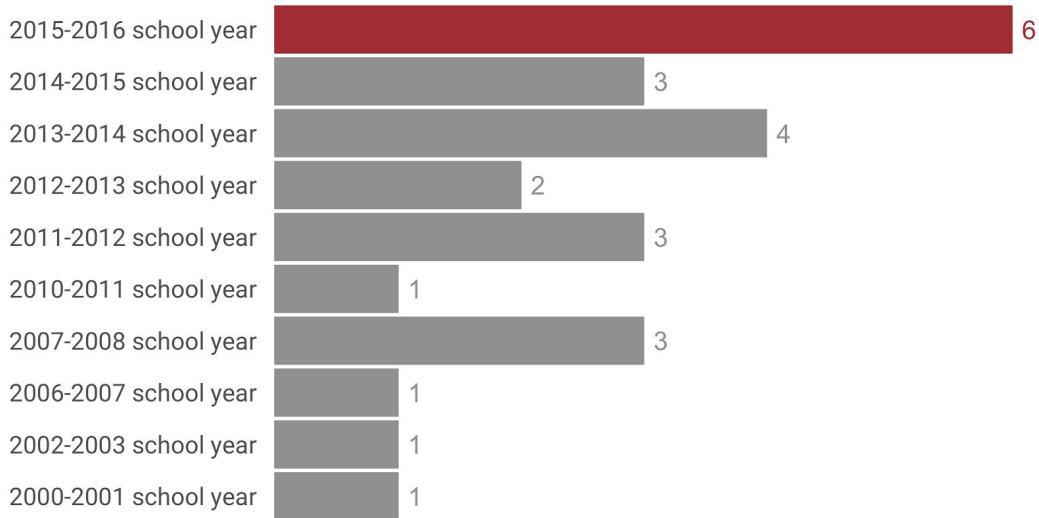
Past and Future Programs

Of schools that did not participate in Outdoor School 2016-2017, most say they have never participated



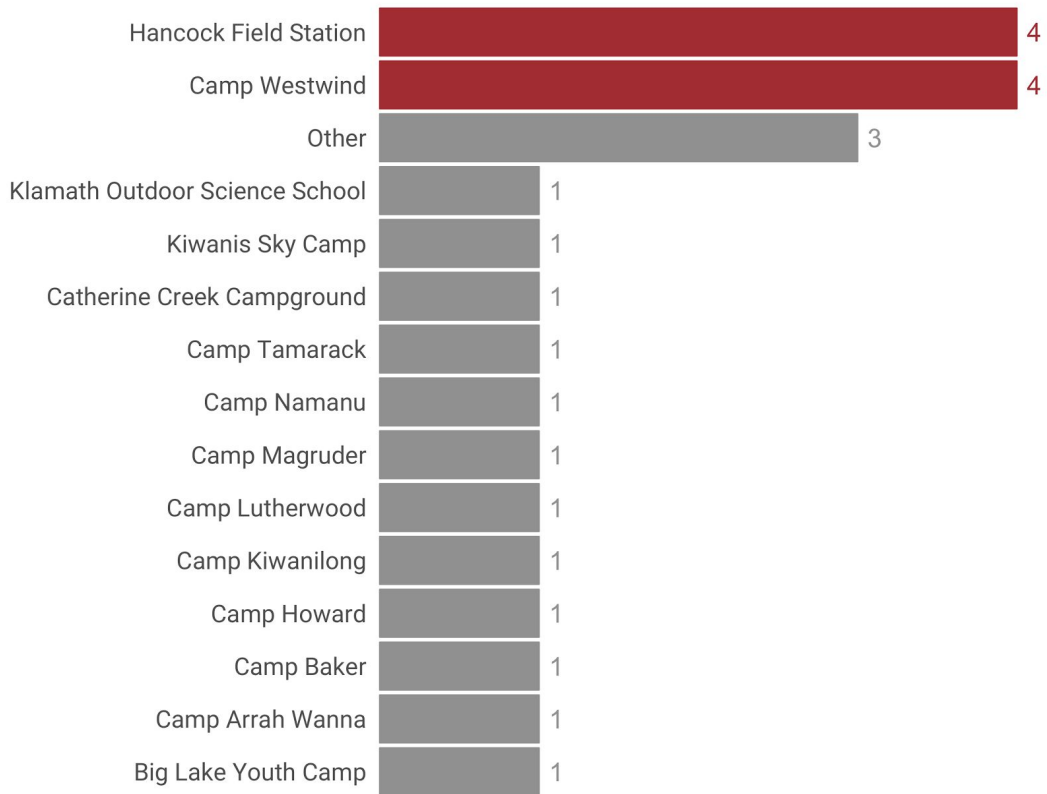
Schools that reported not participating in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 were asked whether they had participated in prior years. While many were not sure, 50 percent reported having never participated, compared to 28 percent that said they had done so.

Among schools that did not participate in Outdoor School in 2016-2017, the most common previous year of involvement was 2015-2016



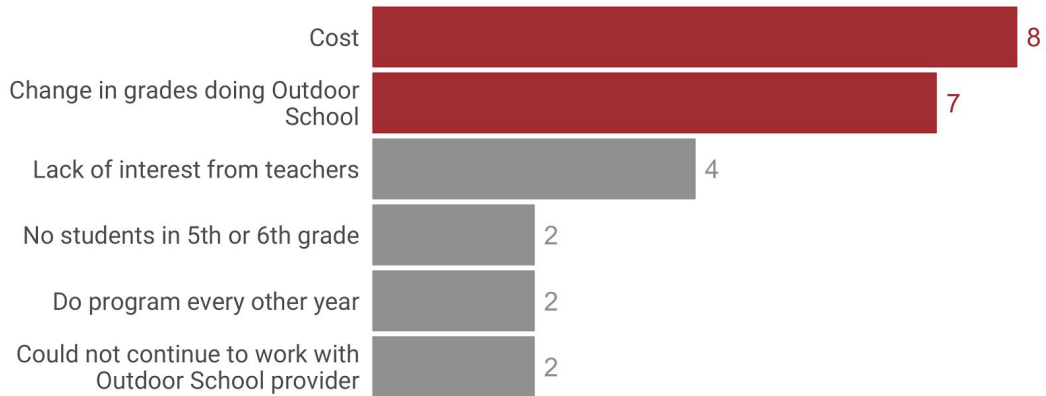
The group of schools that did not participate in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 but did participate in years prior to that were asked when they had last participated in Outdoor School. The most common response was the 2015-2016 school year.

Many schools without current Outdoor School programs last attended Hancock Field Station and Camp Westwind



It is not surprising to see that the most camps that many of these schools attended in their last year of Outdoor School participation were Hancock Field Station and Camp Westwind, two of the most popular sites for schools in 2016-2017.

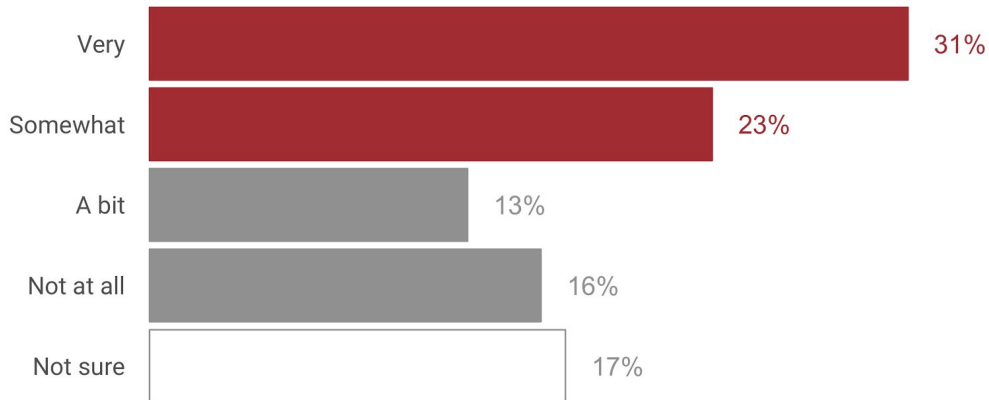
The most common reasons for dropping Outdoor School programs were cost and a change in the grades involved



Why did these schools stop participating in Outdoor School? The most common reason was cost. Outdoor School can be an expensive program to run and several schools indicated that budget cuts forced them to cut it. Another common reason that programs were dropped was due to a change in the grades participating (e.g. a middle school stops participating because the district makes Outdoor School a fifth grade activity at the elementary school).



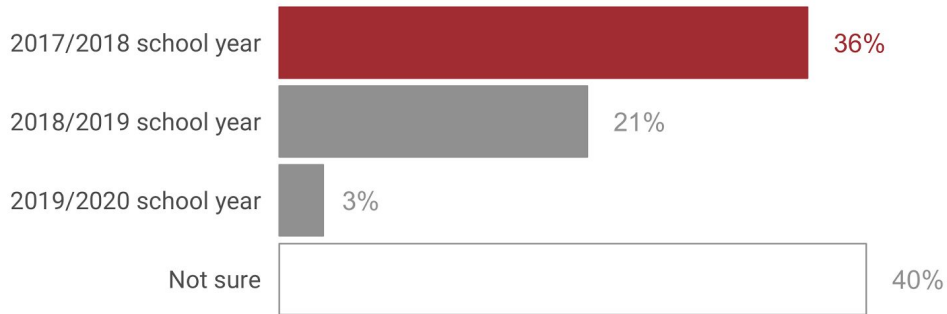
Over half of schools without Outdoor School programs say they are very or somewhat interested in starting one



To what degree are schools that did not participate in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 interested in doing so in the future? Over half (54 percent) of schools reported being very or somewhat interested in starting a program.

Importantly, 16 percent of schools said they are not at all interested in doing so, though this group likely includes some schools whose “sister schools” (e.g. the middle school to into which an elementary school feeds) participate, negating the need for them to add a program. In addition, 17 percent of schools without current programs said they were not sure if they might be interested in starting Outdoor School programs, perhaps indicating a degree of uncertainty about future Measure 99 funding.

Of schools with a date in mind to start an Outdoor School program, most plan to start during the 2017-2018 school year, but many are not sure

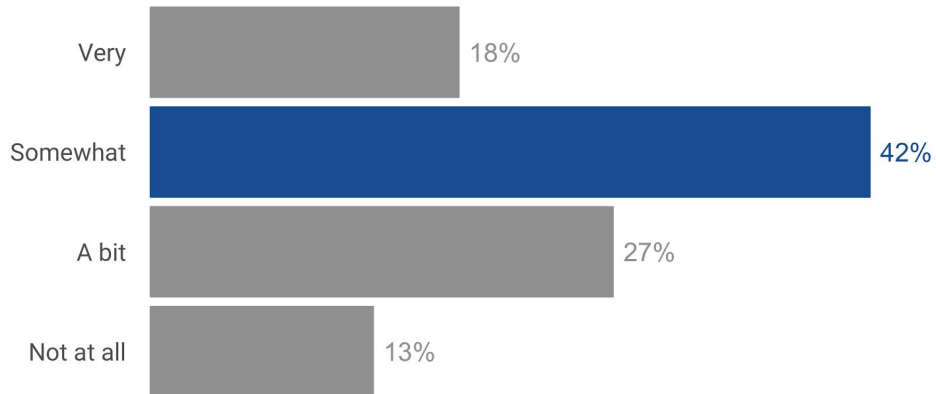


Among schools that expressed interest in starting an Outdoor School program, the most common response (36 percent of schools) to when they would be interested in starting it was the 2017-2018 school year. As with the question about whether they would be interested in starting a program, many schools (40 percent in this case), said they were not sure when they might be interested in doing so.



Measure 99

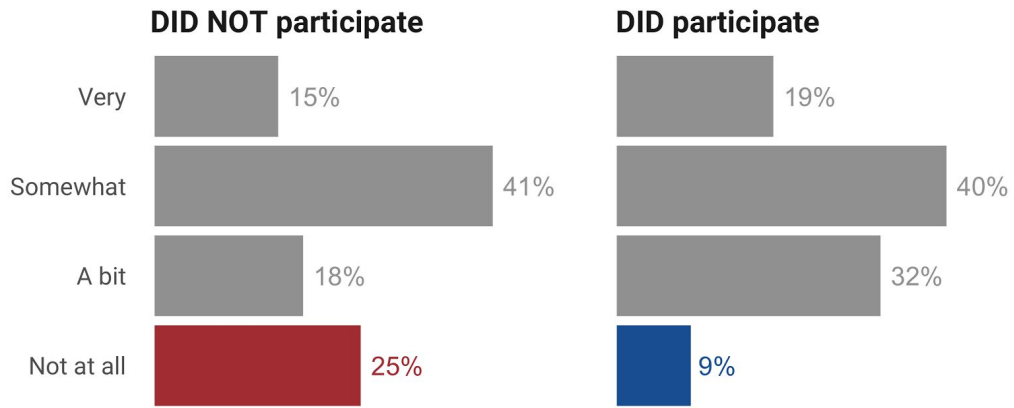
Most schools say they are somewhat familiar with Measure 99



With Measure 99 on the horizon, schools were asked about their level of familiarity with the new funding mechanism for Outdoor School. Overall, the largest group was the 42 percent of schools that said they were somewhat familiar with the measure.



Schools that DID NOT participate in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 are more likely to be not at all familiar with Measure 99 than are those that DID participate

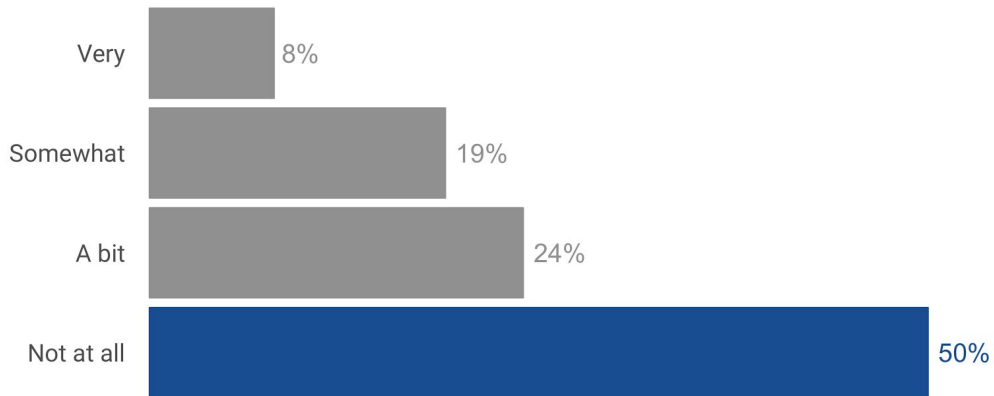


Breaking down responses to this question to separate school that participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 compared to those did not, we can gauge whether there were differences between the two groups.

The major difference between the two groups can be seen at the lower end of familiarity. While only nine percent of schools that participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 said they were not at all familiar with Measure 99, 25 percent of schools that did not participate gave the same response.



Half of schools are not at familiar with Oregon State University Extension Service's role in funding Outdoor School programs



Measure 99 authorized Oregon State University Extension Service to manage the distribution of funds for Outdoor School programs. Asked about their familiarity with Oregon State University Extension Service's role with regard to Measure 99, fully half of schools said they were not at all familiar with it³.

Overall, there is currently much confusion about Measure 99. While more respondents said they were somewhat familiar with Measure 99 than they did any other option, the depth of this knowledge does not appear to run particularly deep.

The allocation of funds by the state legislature in the summer of 2017 has meant a very short timeframe for rolling out the first round of funding during the 2017-2018 school year. Given this, it isn't entirely surprising that many expressed confusion about how exactly Measure 99 funding would work. One school principal believed that only camps run by Oregon State University Extension Service would be approved for funding. Another principal, whose school has extensive outdoor education programming, said he had no idea what was happening with Measure 99.

³ An analysis of potential differences between schools that participated in Outdoor School in 2016-2017 and those that did not showed only small differences with regard to familiarity with the Oregon State University Extension Service role.

Other schools are more aware of the details of Measure 99. Some are concerned about what strings might be attached to funding. Several interviewees told me that they were concerned that Measure 99 would require them to, for example, attend a different site than they had previously. Jodi Beanland in Klamath Falls worried that her students would no longer be able to attend Camp Westwind, and thus miss out on what was, for many, their only opportunity to see the ocean.

Gina Dunning, a fifth grade teacher at Vern Patrick Elementary School in Redmond, expressed concern about Measure 99 prohibiting schools from asking parents to pay for their children to participate in Outdoor School. She wrote that “with the state law not allowing schools to request that parents pay for field trips, I am concerned that we will not be able to attend outdoor school in the future. We have always asked families to contribute a portion of the cost so we can go. We do not have funds to do it otherwise.”

Overall, it appears that much work remains to be done in clarifying what Measure 99 will mean for schools that apply for funding.



How do Schools Create Successful Outdoor School Programs?

Overall, nearly two-thirds of schools in Oregon currently participate in Outdoor School, and many that do not are interested in doing so in the future. This finding is particularly striking given that teachers and administrators repeatedly highlighted the amount of work involved in managing Outdoor School programs.

In interviews with people from all parts of the state, school staff repeatedly said that the work involved is, as Aimee Viramontes, fifth grade teacher at Hoover Elementary School in Corvallis put it, a “full time job.” How, then, have so many schools been able to create successful Outdoor School programs?



For years, schools that have participated in Outdoor School have had to spend a significant amount of time doing fundraising for what is often an expensive program.

Jodi Beanland, sixth grade teacher at Ferguson Elementary School in Klamath Falls, talked about doing a candle sale, a photo booth at a school family night, and a walk-a-thon to raise money for her school’s Outdoor School program.

In Vale, a small town in Eastern Oregon, Willowcreek Elementary School raises money by recycling cans. Their four-day, three-night Outdoor School program at McCall Outdoor Science School in Idaho, is funded, as teacher Marti Bair put it, “five cents at a time.”

Willowcreek, like many schools in the state, that serves a high-poverty population. As a result, the school cannot ask families to contribute much, if anything, to offset the cost of Outdoor School programs.

Schools that have been able to call on local support receive it from families, who pay directly to send their children to Outdoor School, or through parent-teacher associations, booster clubs, local education foundations, businesses, and other organizations that offer financial resources to support local education efforts. No matter how Outdoor School programs are paid for, the work to raise funds for them is extensive.

In addition to fundraising, there is significant work involved in organizing Outdoor School programs. This organizational work takes place on two levels: logistics and curriculum development.

On the logistics front, schools must come up with answers to many questions: when to participate in Outdoor School, where to go, which provider (if any) to work with, who will staff their program, how they will travel to and from their site location, how they will handle food during the program, and more.

Arranging these logistics is a huge amount of work for those who do it. Sixth grade teacher Ashley Wilson at Conestoga Middle School in Beaverton noted that “teachers at our school spend countless unpaid hours planning and organizing.”

“Teachers at our school spend countless unpaid hours planning and organizing.”

Curriculum development, as discussed above, is sometimes done internally by teachers, sometimes done externally by outside providers, and very often done by a combination of the two. Having teachers develop the curriculum gives them control to ensure that Outdoor School learning builds on what happens in the classroom, but it is also an involved process. For many schools, relying on outsiders to develop at least a significant chunk of the curriculum has reduced the planning burden significantly.

At most schools, there is a small group of teachers and/or administrators who are the driving force behind Outdoor School programs. The work that these staff members take on is significant, and some expressed concern that the burden falls inordinately on a few people. The most robust Outdoor School programs are those that receive multilevel support. In addition to the core group of organizers, these programs have buy-in from the rest of the teaching staff, administrators, school districts, families, and local communities.

Teachers involved directly with Outdoor School must be willing to spend several days away from home (and those not directly involved must adapt to student and staff absences). Brian Kissell, principal of Highland School in Bend, spoke of being incredibly appreciative of his teachers, who are willing to do what it takes to support their school's Outdoor School program. A school where he previously worked did not have such support from the teaching staff, and he saw teachers "get bent out of shape" as a result of feeling forced to be involved with Outdoor School.

School administrators must also support programs in order for them to thrive. Pre-Measure 99, the decision on whether to participate in Outdoor School has often been left up to individual principals. If a principal did not want to have his or her school participate in Outdoor School, that was often the final word.

Having teachers and administrators on board is necessary but not sufficient for Outdoor School programs to thrive. One principal said that she was a strong supporter of Outdoor School, but had no idea what, if any, support her district offers for it. Without this broader support, she has not implemented an Outdoor School program at her school, and she told me, "I don't think anybody I work with even knows that I'm a passionate Outdoor School supporter."

"I don't think anybody I work with even knows that I'm a passionate Outdoor School supporter."

Community support is also vital for the success of Outdoor School programs. Parents are first among the community members who support Outdoor School programs. They volunteer and, in some cases, have helped with planning programs, as was the case last year at Grande Ronde Academy in La Grande,

where Jennie Yancey worked in partnership with the Blue Mountain Conservancy to plan a two-day program for students. At Hoover Elementary School in Corvallis, a parent organizing committee helped teacher Aimee Viramontes. “I couldn’t have done it without them,” she said.

At Bend-based Highland School, community support is evident in the many years that parent volunteers have been active in volunteering to make the program run. In fact, when the school went to Camp Tamarack in 2016-2017, multiple families were upset because this provider did not offer the opportunity for parents to volunteer, as they had done in the past. Principal Brian Kissell said that he has decided to return the program to its previous incarnation, a largely self-organized program at Suttle Lake, for the 2017-2018 school year in order to take advantage of the strong community support. Kissell readily pointed out that his school is relatively affluent, and the community support he is able to draw on reflects the resources available to families whose children attend his school. In schools with fewer resources, families are often unable to offer such support.

There are also particular reasons why some communities may be less supportive of Outdoor School programs. Several school staff told me that they have encountered parents who are reluctant to allow their children to leave home and travel to remote parts of the state for several days.

At Grandhaven Elementary School in McMinnville, principal Marjorie Johnson talked about several of her Latino families being particularly hesitant to allow their children to attend Outdoor School in the 2016-2017 school year. Referring to a growing anti-immigrant environment in spring 2017, she said that “there were a lot of things going on in the world politically in the spring last year,” and many families at her school were scared. This fear, she suspects, caused many Latino families, some of whom may include undocumented members, to choose not to send their children to Outdoor School.

Conclusion

As Oregon enters a new era for Outdoor School, one of the major challenges for Measure 99 will be to develop a funding structure that works for the wide range of schools that exist in Oregon.

Oregon has an incredible diversity of schools. In the database of 1135 schools developed for this project, there are one-room schoolhouses with ten students in rural Eastern Oregon alongside massive schools with over 1000 students in Salem. There are schools located near sites used for Outdoor Schools and schools that are far from any site. There are public schools alongside private schools.

While Salem-based Stephens Middle School principal Jennie Madland wonders how she can find a way to send all of her 1200 students to Outdoor School, Delaney Sharp, head teacher at 26-student Black Butte Elementary School in Camp Sherman, frets that his Outdoor School program will need to be changed to meet Measure 99 requirements. During 2016-2017, he took 14 fourth through eighth graders, and he worries that he will no longer be able to conduct this type of multi-grade program. In a school as small as his, he cannot justify the disruption of taking a handful of students and a teacher out of the classroom.

Meanwhile, in Eastern Oregon, Marti Bair worries that she will no longer be permitted to take her students to McCall Outdoor Science School in Idaho despite it being the most convenient site for her school. Other sites are hundreds of miles further, and she worries about being able to justify the time and cost associated with traveling to them.



And while Measure 99 funds currently go only to public schools, should private schools become eligible, other considerations would come to the fore, particularly with regard to the many religious schools in Oregon. At Gaarde Christian School in Tigard, principal Kendra Jones wonders whether Measure 99 funding would permit her school to continue to incorporate faith-based service work that they do simultaneously with their Outdoor School program.

Developing a structure that works for all of the diverse schools in Oregon is no easy task, but one that will be necessary if Measure 99 is to succeed.



Many schools throughout Oregon are looking forward to receiving funds from Measure 99. Many would also like to receive technical assistance on the organization of Outdoor School programs. Planning and managing programs involves significant work, and many schools struggle with where to begin.

Several teachers and administrators who had little or no experience with Outdoor School suggested that, in addition to funding from Measure 99, it would help to receive guidance from those with more experience. Sixth grade teacher Donna Rexford of McGovern Elementary School in Winston, for example, wrote of wanting this type of comprehensive assistance: “The sixth grade team has been putting together an outdoor program for our students for the past several years. 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.”

“It would be nice to receive assistance in the form of ideas, presenters and money.”

One advantage that Oregon has is that, with Outdoor School in its seventh decade, there is a wealth of expertise throughout the state in running Outdoor School programs. Dee Upton, sixth grader teacher at East Elementary in Tillamook, mentioned that she and others in Tillamook School District, which has sent students to Outdoor School for 51 years, would love to serve as mentors

for schools developing their programs. Enabling the sharing of expertise, in addition to providing funds, might be one way for Measure 99 to ensure the long-term success of Outdoor School in Oregon.



The challenges to organizing successful Outdoor School programs may be significant, but so are the benefits they offer students. Over and over again, teachers and administrators talked about students being engaged with their learning while at Outdoor School in ways they had never seen before.

Sixth grade teacher Jodi Beanland in Klamath Falls recalls a student with behavior struggles undergoing a dramatic change during their school's four-day, three-night trip to Camp Westwind. "Up until Outdoor School, he was a real challenge in the classroom. I connected with him somehow. We got him to the beach. The entire week, he was in awe of the beach. He had never been there. And the kids in the class got to see a different side of him. When he came back from Outdoor School, he had friends. He had a different outlook on school. His grades went up. I told him, 'now you have to carry this through and graduate!'" And, Beanland said, the impact on her students is long-lasting. "We come back and they're different kids."

"We come back [from Outdoor School] and they're different kids."

Several people talked about the role that Outdoor School plays in helping students to bond with teachers and with each other. Edgewood Community Elementary School fifth grade teacher David Wines said his school has chosen to attend Outdoor School in the fall in part because it offers an opportunity for bonding early in the school year. This bonding has an impact on academic performance as well, according to Wines. When students get along with their teachers and with each other, they are more likely to perform well in the classroom.

Other teachers talked about Outdoor School as of the few times when they are able to teach science throughout the year. In schools struggling with state

reading and math assessments, there can be pressure to narrowly focus instruction on these subjects. But, for a few days, students have the opportunity to learn science and “think like scientists.”

Beyond the immediate academic impacts, Outdoor School is also, for many students, particularly those who come from limited financial means, one of the few times they have an opportunity to leave the communities where they grow up. Seeing new places and learning in different ways opens their eyes to new possibilities.

Sixth grade teacher Marti Bair values Willowcreek Elementary School’s Outdoor School program at McCall Outdoor Science School because it is staffed by students from the University of Idaho. For many of her students, it is their first exposure to higher education, and it offers them an opportunity to consider a new future for themselves.

Willowcreek’s Outdoor School program, like those across Oregon, may only last a few days, but the impact that Outdoor School can have on the students who participate can still be seen years later.



Methodology

Data for this report comes a variety of sources. A comprehensive database of 1135 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 to provide information about their Outdoor School participation (or lack thereof)⁴. Schools that did not respond received a follow-up email. Schools that did respond to both emails were called in order to gather information about their participation⁵. Data that came directly from schools was combined with further data about Outdoor School participation from sites that host programs as well as providers (the Multnomah Education Service District Outdoor School program, for instance) that offer curriculum and other support.

Of the 1135 schools in the database, 208 were not included because while they did not have Outdoor School themselves, their sister school (e.g. the middle school that an elementary school feeds into) did. The 149 schools that did not respond were also dropped. Two schools that did not do Outdoor School but have substantial outdoor education programming dropped, putting the total count of schools analyzed at 776.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 teachers and principals. Five Outdoor School providers were also interviewed to gain a broader perspective on the state of Outdoor School in Oregon. The quantitative data used in this report gives us the who, what, where, and when of Outdoor School

⁴ 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.

⁵ Schools that were called often only provided basic information about their Outdoor School programs, including whether or not they participated, the number and grades of students, the length of their programs, and which site they attended. Due to time limitations, most of these schools did not provide information about the other items discussed in this report.

participation. Adding qualitative data enables us to also say how and why schools run their Outdoor School programs. The mixed-methods approach used in this report gives both a broad and a deep understanding of Outdoor School today in Oregon.