

Building trust, investing, and getting out of the way: Our path to a \$1 million gift

By Nancy Bales, Executive Director, Gray Family Foundation

Reimagining Our Grantmaking Approach

A foundation's vision is never static. It indicates a direction, even a destination, but recognizes that the terrain that we must traverse to get there is constantly shifting.

At Gray Family Foundation, we stay true to our vision by continually reimagining our approach. We believe we have a responsibility to collaborate with those closest to the issues to improve our grantmaking and support communities more effectively. Our support for outdoor school programs in Oregon reflects this evolution. We have listened, learned, stretched, and reimagined our role in response to the evolving challenges and opportunities that our communities encounter.

Living out this vision, and these values, recently led our board to approve an unprecedented grant: a \$1 million, unrestricted gift to [Friends of Outdoor School](#).

Established in 2011 through the generosity of John and Betty Gray, the [Gray Family Foundation](#) was founded on the belief that fostering an understanding and appreciation of our natural world is a crucial part of a child's education. We approach this with a commitment to flexibility and to building more equitable funder-nonprofit relationships by valuing power sharing over control.

Gray Family Foundation and outdoor school

[Over the past 11 years](#), the Gray Family Foundation has awarded over \$20 million in grants to support environmental education, camp maintenance, geography education, and outdoor school in Oregon.

Supporting Oregon's outdoor school program, which has existed since 1957, has always been an integral component to carrying out our mission. A residential camp experience for Oregon's fifth- and sixth-graders, outdoor school immerses students in the world's greatest classroom.



Middle school students taking a break at outdoor school.

The funding landscape for outdoor school shifts

Over the years, funding for this important program has been spotty and insecure. As a grantmaker, we focused on filling in gaps so students could attend outdoor school programs, but we also recognized that was not a long-term solution. In 2016, Gray Family Foundation, in partnership with [Friends of Outdoor School](#), took the first step in reimagining our role by deciding to seek out a systemic solution: statewide funding.

Gray Family Foundation became the primary backer for the campaign to pass [Measure 99: Outdoor School for All](#), working in tandem with Friends and a coalition of supporters. Oregon voters enthusiastically approved Measure 99, and since 2017, the state has dedicated more than \$20 million a year to outdoor school programs through lottery revenue. Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Service now oversees programming statewide.

With stable funding secured, attendance at outdoor school programs has risen year over year. More than a dozen new programs have started up or expanded significantly across the state. Many fifth- and sixth graders are now attending for five days instead of two or three, and all school districts have access to funding enabling their students to participate.

Actively cultivating trust

Now that outdoor school programs are supported with state funding, we no longer need to be a resource to fill in the gaps to ensure all kids have this opportunity. What is needed, however, is an organization that can ensure the long-term integrity, equity, and excellence of outdoor school, providing third-party support that no individual program, state agency, or grantmaker can offer.

Friends of Outdoor School is that organization.

“Too few philanthropic organizations fund the backbone support and advocacy required for long-term systems change.”

Over the past five years, Friends of Outdoor School has evolved dramatically into a backbone organization providing systemic support for the growing network of programs and working to embed equity and inclusion into outdoor school programming. They bring together program leaders to share excellence and respond to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They have helped OSU deploy resources to improve accessibility at camps and improve programs’ cultural responsiveness. They are also critical in advocating for outdoor school with legislators, government agencies, and other decision-makers.

Like Friends of Outdoor School, Gray Family Foundation has reevaluated our role in ensuring the future of outdoor school.

Too few philanthropic organizations fund the backbone support and advocacy required for long-term systems change. As a philanthropic organization, we know that we need to build true partnerships with organizations embedded in the communities we serve—and then equip them with the resources needed to respond to community needs and opportunities. We also have learned that, whenever possible, it is important to do what we can to remove barriers to achieving these goals, including the burden many nonprofits face when they must constantly fundraise for important work.

As we contemplated making a grant of this size, our board of trustees asked itself: What purpose would it serve us to retain control over these funds and this relationship with Friends of Outdoor School? What more could the organization do if it had the resources—and the agency—to plan and innovate in the way that reflects our shared mission and values?

We ultimately decided that if Gray Family Foundation is committed to ensuring the sustainability of outdoor school and making it accessible to all schoolchildren in Oregon, we must invest in the organization that we trust is best positioned to do the work—and then get out of the way.