



Gray Family Foundation announces a \$1 million grant

Gray Family Foundation is proud to announce our largest gift to date—one that we have made to ensure outdoor school is, and continues to be, a transformative experience for every student in Oregon.

We believe outdoor school is an integral part of children’s education. To help ensure the future of this essential program, the foundation has awarded [Friends of Outdoor School](#) a \$1 million unrestricted gift that will support Friends’ capacity-building and advocacy efforts. Oregon Community Foundation will manage the funds in trust for the nonprofit over the course of the next 10 years.

What does this gift mean for outdoor school students?

The [benefits of outdoor education are well-documented](#), but outdoor school programs in Oregon have largely been built by and for white, able-bodied, English-speaking students. Activities have not always been accessible to students from lower-income families and those from marginalized backgrounds.

In 2016, Oregon voters passed [Measure 99: Outdoor School for All](#) to reduce inequity in access. Starting in 2017, the state began funding outdoor school through lottery revenue. The passage of this voter initiative was a huge victory—creating new opportunities as well as new challenges.

During the 2021-22 school year, close to 50,000 students in grades 5-7 have signed up to attend an outdoor school program—60% more than in 2016—and an additional 2,500-3,000 high school students will serve as leaders. More than a dozen new outdoor school programs have started up across the state since 2017 or have expanded significantly to serve this increased demand.

But the surge in participants is only part of the story. Many programs have now expanded from three days to a full school week. And individual school programs, school districts, and alumni have all come together, with the help of Friends, to make these educational programs more inclusive, more welcoming, and more accessible.

Friends and the Gray Family Foundation

[Over the past 11 years](#), the Gray Family Foundation has awarded over \$20 million in grants to support environmental education, camp maintenance, geography education, including nearly \$5 million in grants to individual outdoor school programs. We have also provided years of direct support to Friends of Outdoor

School, to help make outdoor experiences more equitable in Oregon. It is thanks to the leadership at Friends that Oregon continues to build upon a strong network of support for outdoor school.

Since the state began funding outdoor school for all students, Friends 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.

Increasingly, Friends has come to play a critical role advocating for outdoor school with legislators, OSU, government agencies, and other decision-makers—something no other outdoor school program or statewide organization does.

Why this gift is important

We at Gray Family Foundation have seen how effectively Friends of Outdoor School has supported outdoor school programs throughout the state. With this gift, we are investing in an organization that is deeply aligned with our own beliefs. We believe that Friends is best positioned to determine their needs and advocate for the future of outdoor school. We want the organization to have control over the resources it needs to do this critical work.

“For us at Friends of Outdoor School, this gift is a huge vote of confidence in the evolving roles we have taken on over the past five years,” says executive director Kim Silva. “This grant, along with our committed donor base, provides a steady financial foundation for our work for the next 10 years and allows us to steer grant funding opportunities toward projects not funded by Measure 99.”

Even after 50 years of existence, outdoor school has room to grow and improve. All of us must continue to work together to make sure every Oregon student—whatever their hometown, cultural background, or degree of physical mobility—experiences the educational development and personal growth that the nation's best outdoor education programs can offer.