



NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

2019

PROGRAM REPORT

Mountain School is our 30-year-old residential education program at the Environmental Learning Center in the heart of North Cascades National Park. Over 3 days, students spend 26 hours learning about ecological communities with their classmates, teachers, and parent chaperones. Hands-on, interdisciplinary experiences connect students to the natural and cultural history of the North Cascades. For many, this is the first time they visit a national park, spend a night away from home, and discover the connections between their lives, communities, and the environment.

Program Goals and Outcomes

CONNECTION to nature and fellow classmates through cooperative learning



“ I got to meet other people that I would have never met otherwise. I made new friends from my school whose names I wouldn't have known if I did not come to Mountain School.

— Student from Evergreen Elementary

INSPIRATION to continue learning and connecting with the natural world



“ Don't be scared of the wild, we live here. It's our earth, we protect it.

— Student from Northern Heights Elementary

KNOWLEDGE of North Cascades ecosystems and scientific processes



“ My tree was a Douglas Fir. The bark on the tree is fire resistant, and the pine cone has a spiky shell, and the branches don't grow until 15 to 20 feet up. It gives food to mini plants.

— Student from Island View Elementary

SUPPORTING SCHOOLS in meeting state and national education standards



“ What I've learned on this trip is that staying inside isn't always a good thing. Sometimes you need to get outside and look at the wilderness.

— Student from Methow Valley Elementary

Quotes are from student-penned postcards, written to themselves and mailed after Mountain School.

Participant Snapshot

To reduce barriers, we prioritize participation of full school districts and subsidize fees on a sliding-scale, based on Free & Reduced Lunch percentages. We provide participants with clothing and nutritious, locally-sourced meals.

\$325 full price per participant

\$155 average price paid by schools per participant

2,511 YOUTH participants

49 schools in the NORTH CASCADES ecosystem served

\$530K TUITION SUBSIDIZED by the Institute

39% Identify as PEOPLE OF COLOR

528 TEACHERS & CHAPERONES

96% of schools received FINANCIAL AID

49% students are LOW-INCOME according to free & reduced lunch

14% transitional BILINGUAL

16% SPECIAL EDUCATION students

2019 Instructor Highlight: Marilú Fernandez Silva

Time spent in nature increases self-reliance, independence, and confidence. For this reason, the Institute aims to create leadership experiences and pathways to employment by offering internship, apprenticeship, and volunteer opportunities to local young adults from identity groups that have been historically under-represented in the environmental sector.

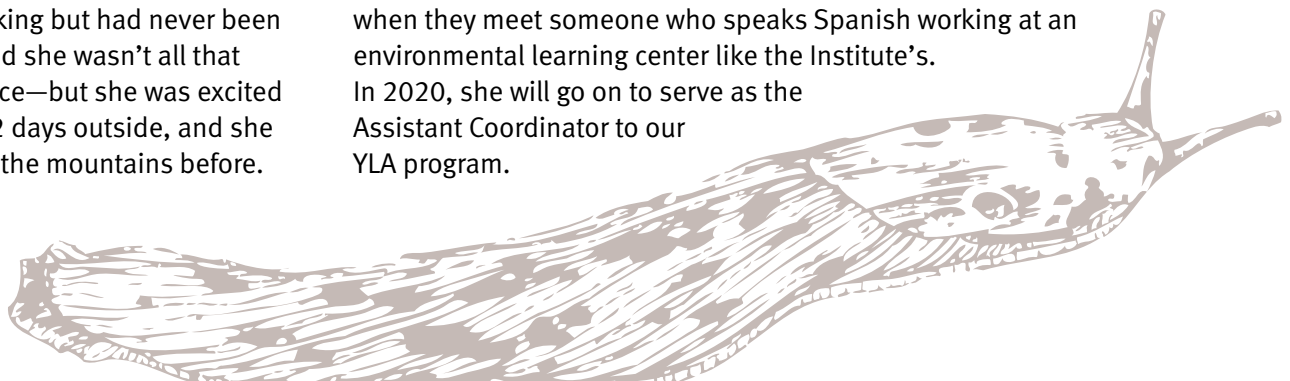
Marilú is from Mount Vernon and first participated with the Institute in 2015 in our Youth Leadership Adventures (YLA) program. Her school counselor at La Conner High School, Lori Buher, recommended she apply. Marilú was hesitant at first—she loved hiking but had never been camping before and she wasn't all that interested in science—but she was excited about spending 12 days outside, and she had never been to the mountains before.



After YLA, Marilú went on to earn a degree in international studies from the University of Washington. “Something I learned from college is that your degree does not determine your career. I looked at the job qualifications [for the Mountain School Assistant Instructor position at the Institute] and thought, ‘I can do more than half of these, and the others, I can learn.’”

Marilú's determination and interest in lifelong learning were an asset to the Mountain School instructor team this past Fall. She says the most rewarding part of her job is seeing how excited kids get when they meet someone who speaks Spanish working at an environmental learning center like the Institute's.

In 2020, she will go on to serve as the Assistant Coordinator to our YLA program.



Outcomes and Evaluation

We conduct teacher surveys that assess the impact of the program on students. Teachers report the following benefits of Mountain School:

Environmental Science

“Mountain School brings science alive in a way that I can't replicate in the classroom. Students who have never been away from home before and/or have not spent considerable time in the woods get to experience such a well-run educational experience.

— **Rachael Robbins**, Bay View Elementary teacher

75% increased comfort being outdoors

78% increased respect for the environment

96% increased awareness of conservation issues



53% increased respect for peers

59% increased teamwork and cooperation

53% increased leadership skills

Social-Emotional Learning

“Students gain great respect for each other, learn to cooperate and support one another. My students now see themselves as stewards of our environment, and take the job seriously. I have great hope for the future of our planet due to the time our students spent with you.

— **Jennifer Williams**, Bay View Elementary teacher



Sense of Place

“Our ecosystems are like gears, and if we take one piece out it won't work.

— Student from Anacortes

96% increased awareness of public lands

72% awareness of personal choices on the environment

81% understanding of humans as a part of nature



65% support integration of Next Generation Science Standards

84% equalized experiences in nature

57% valuable opportunity to integrate parents

Classroom and Community

“Mountain School connects right into my science unit on food webs and human impacts on the environment. It sets up the unit as well as becomes a reference point for prior learning and a shared experience throughout the year.

— **Charlie Huddleston**, Evergreen Elementary teacher





Welcome to Mountain School:
What are YOU looking forward to?



Setting Mountain School Apart: Supporting Dual-Language Schools

Over the past 5 years, we've seen an increase in the dual-language needs of the students we serve. In 2015, 9% of our students were English Language Learners compared to over 14% in 2019 (2% higher than state average). Additionally, two of the schools we serve—Madison Elementary from Mount Vernon School District and Westview Elementary from Burlington-Edison School District—are dual-language schools. These schools follow a 50:50 model: 50% of students are native/bilingual Spanish speakers and 50% are native/bilingual English speakers, and students spend half of each day learning in Spanish and half learning in English.

This year, in order to better support all our school groups, we offered a pay credential to instructors fluent in Spanish. Of our 16 instructors, 3 were able to teach entirely in Spanish and 6 others, with conversational Spanish skills, were able to better facilitate student and chaperone learning.

Shifting our hiring practices to better meet the needs of the students we serve contributes to the future of environmental education in our region. Having talented staff who can not only teach lessons in Spanish but also support students' social-emotional needs in their native tongue is essential to changing the face of who recreates in our national parks and ultimately who will advocate for future conservation.

“ *Me gustola maestrse porque se porto bien platique con mis amigos. Me gusto el juego. Me gusto la vista es muy bonita. Me gusto todo lo que hisimos me gusto el baile loco que hisimos.*

[I liked the teacher because they talked well with my friends. I liked the games. I liked the beautiful views. I liked all we did, I liked the crazy dance that we made.]

—Student from Birchwood Elementary

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We extend our special thanks to these organizations and individuals for their generous support.

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► For **in-kind support** from Exped, Acorn Naturalists, and SmartWool

► And **276 individuals** who donated to youth and school programs