

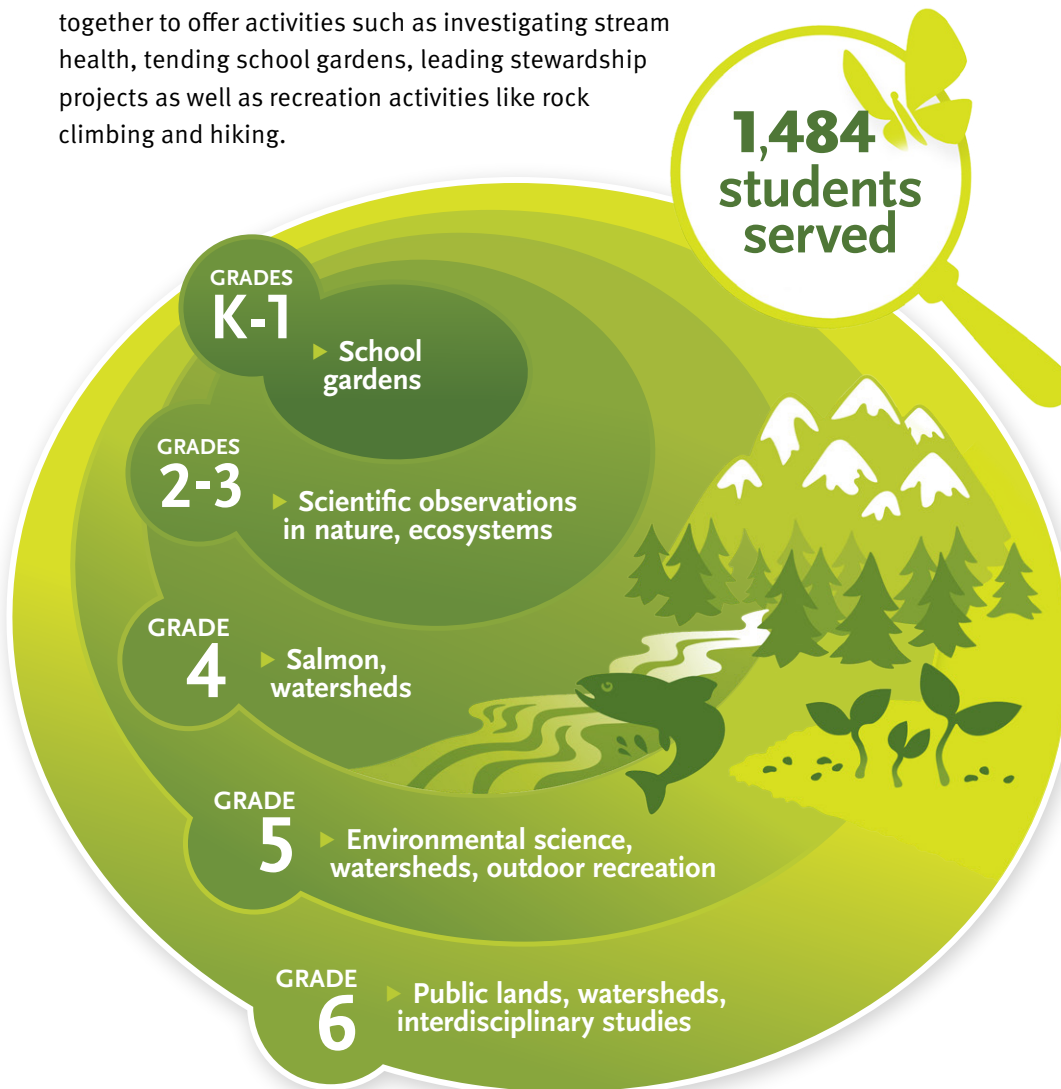
CONNECTIONS

2023-2024
OUTCOMES
REPORT

Connecting students to outdoor learning opportunities through community partnerships

Connections aims to support every K-6 student in Mount Baker and Blaine School Districts with 5-10 hours of outdoor instruction on school grounds, at local parks, and off-site at Silver Lake and in North Cascades National Park during the school year.

A Coalition of five collaborating organizations are coming together to offer activities such as investigating stream health, tending school gardens, leading stewardship projects as well as recreation activities like rock climbing and hiking.



PURPOSE

- ▶ Serve all Mount Baker and Blaine School District students, grades K-6
- ▶ Provide locally-focused outdoor education linked with learning standards
- ▶ Connect students to their environment
- ▶ Help rural school districts leverage local resources and expertise
- ▶ Model collaboration for a healthy community

PARTNERS

- ▶ [Common Threads Farm](#)
- ▶ [Wild Whatcom](#)
- ▶ [Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association](#)
- ▶ [Camp Saturna](#)
- ▶ [North Cascades Institute](#)



Our unique approach consolidates community resources to provide a strategic pathway so that students at each grade level build inquiry skills and engage in scientific practices during supported interactions with the local environment. The primary goals of this project are to foster **environmental stewardship and joyful habits of outdoor exploration** that are strongly linked to academic and socio-emotional learning.

LEARN MORE WhatcomEnvironmentalEducation.com/ConnectionsProgram

SPECIAL THANKS

to these funders and supporters:

- ▶ Representative Alicia Rule
- ▶ Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education
- ▶ Blaine and Mount Baker Schools Districts

MOUNT BAKER SCHOOL DISTRICT

Continuing the work begun in 2021 with our Coalition of community partners, the Connections program in Mount Baker School District (MBSD) provides hands-on outdoor education in an array of topics for nearly every student K-6.

All grades received **gardening lessons**. Second and third graders learned about **ecosystems, adaptation, and habitats**. Fourth graders learned about **salmon life cycle and habitat**. At Silver Lake, fifth graders deepened understanding of **biospheres and watersheds**. Sixth graders conducted **science experiments** and **stewardship projects** at Whatcom Falls Park.



38
CLASSROOMS
SERVED



“In school, kids have their little groups they hang out with, outside, they all interact with each other differently, in different groups.”

— Mary Sewright, Mount Baker School District Superintendent

898
STUDENTS SERVED

9,395
NATURE HOURS

Alignment with MBSD Strategic Plan 2020-2025: The Connections program aligns with **Next Generation Science Standards** as well as MBSD’s Strategic Plan **Goal 1: Learning and Teaching** (*Leverage the power of the Mount Baker community; including people, natural resources and rich local history to engage, equip and empower students with skills needed to impact and strengthen local, regional, and global communities*) and **Goal 5: Community Engagement** (*Establish and cultivate strong bonds with our Mount Baker community while honoring diverse family cultures to enrich the educational program*).

Alignment with Priority Supports for Students Identified by District:

- Building Relationships
- Early Learning (K-4 literacy)
- Extended Day Partnerships (CBOs)
- Extracurricular Activities
- Multi-tiered System of Supports
- SEL and Mental Health Supports

STUDENT IMPACTS

“I hope you aren’t planning on making a salad for dinner tonight, Mama, because I am going to make one for you!”

—Harmony Elementary student to his mom after making “plant part” salad in class



“The students LOVE getting out into the woods and learning. Our class had two wonderful experiences with knowledgeable, caring, and prepared staff leaders.”

—Harmony Elementary teacher

“I heard many wonderful comments but the most powerful was when a student said to me, ‘I think this was the best day [pause]... of my entire life.’”

—Kendall Elementary teacher

BLAINE SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Connections programs launched in Blaine School District (BSD) in March 2022 and included outings to observe **plant and animal diversity** for second and third graders, **salmon education** for fourth graders, **ecosystem and adaptation lessons** for fifth graders, and **fully outdoors after school programming** for grades K-2.

“As we continue to remove layers of mitigation that have been in effect during the pandemic we know the importance of engaging hands-on real world learning experiences for our students. This partnership allows us to expose our students to some of those valuable learning opportunities outside the classroom. We appreciate the continued partnership within our community as a model of what common vision and partnerships can bring to our students.”

— Dr. Christopher Granger,
Blaine School District Superintendent

STUDENT IMPACTS

“After each field trip my students have returned with a **stronger understanding of environmental science and its relevance to our local ecosystems**. This program is accessible to all students at no cost thanks to support from donors and the hard work Wild Whatcom puts into these well-organized outings.”

—Blaine Elementary teacher



586

STUDENTS SERVED

22

CLASSROOMS SERVED

5,088

NATURE HOURS



Alignment with BSD Strategic Plan 2020-2023:

The Connections program aligns with BSD's **commitment to partnering with parents, students, and community to support a strong foundation for life-long learners** and **Strategic Plan Goal 2: Social Emotional Learning and Student Safety** (*Engage in leading learning where every individual is committed to a safe environment where students can grow and learn in a multitiered system of support*).

Alignment with Priority Supports for Students Identified by District:

- Building Relationships
- Early Learning (K-4 literacy)
- Extracurricular Activities
- Multi-tiered System of Supports
- SEL and Mental Health Supports

“The students were able to **solidify friendship bonds and share experiences outdoors that they would not normally have**. It allowed some more timid students to show their peers who they really are and feel included for the first time.”

—Blaine Elementary teacher

OUTDOOR LEARNING GRANTS

The Connections program is a continuation of a similar collaborative effort started during the 2020-2021 school year in Bellingham, Blaine, and Mount Baker School Districts to support students and districts during remote learning that grew out of the **Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education** (WCEE). Inspired by those efforts, Representative Alicia Rule worked to secure an additional two years of funding to continue programs in Mount Baker and Blaine School Districts as well as championed House Bill 2078: *Outdoor Learning Grants*, to expand outdoor education statewide.

The opening text of *Outdoor Learning Grants* reads, “The [Washington State] legislature finds that time outdoors helps children thrive physically, emotionally, and academically, yet over the past few generations, childhood has moved indoors. On average, today’s kids spend up to 44 hours per week in front of a screen, and less than 10 minutes a day doing activities outdoors. From stress reduction to improved focus and engagement, and better academic performance, outdoor-based learning helps kids thrive.”

“As a social worker and mom, I’ve never seen children’s mental health this bad. But we know that crises can also be opportunities if we move forward with hope. It’s time to recover together by getting kids out from behind screens and into nature.”

— Representative Alicia Rule

The Connections program aims to complement and build upon the recent passage of *Outdoor Learning Grants*, which directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to create a program that will award grants to support schools in offering outdoor learning, requires that OSPI give priority to schools that have been underserved in science education, and encourages the program to work with education stakeholders to develop principles for outdoor education.

LEARN MORE

[WhatcomEnvironmentalEducation.com/ConnectionsProgram](https://www.whatcomenvironmentaleducation.com/connectionsprogram)

