



CONNECTIONS

A Pathway for Place-Based Learning

2024-2025 OUTCOMES REPORT

CONNECTING
STUDENTS
TO ►

Curiosity
Confidence
Community
Culture

THROUGH OUTDOOR ◀
EDUCATION

A child makes a meal from vegetables they grew, discovers the magic of the forest, helps create a healthy habitat for salmon and maybe for the first time, they visit the mountains they've spent their whole life experiencing from afar. They are learning and experiencing so much more than they realize. They are learning to eat well, to feel rooted to place, and discovering the power they have to protect the natural world. They're finding community, building resilience, moving their bodies, and practicing mindfulness. They're gaining skills and experiences that will serve them for a lifetime. They are making **Connections**.

Every child deserves learning experiences like these. The *Connections* program brings this vision to life for K-6 students in the Mount Baker and Blaine School Districts through 5-10 hours of joyful, hands-on outdoor learning each year. Beginning in their own school gardens and expanding outward into local ecosystems, they deepen their understanding of who they are in relation to the land and to community.

*Connections is more than a program—it's a **collective vision** for a healthier, more equitable region, bringing together partners and resources to open a pathway of transformative, culturally rich outdoor learning for every child.*

Our approach is collaborative and centered on the whole child. Through a coalition of community organizations, Tribal partners, and schools, we integrate classroom learning with place-based experiences such as studying salmon life cycles, exploring school gardens and living systems, investigating watersheds, and learning about mountain ecosystems.

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1,032

Students Served
2024-2025

GRADES K-1

School
gardens, soil,
and plant life



GRADES 2-3

Ecosystems
and habitats



GRADE 4

Salmon,
watersheds
and stewardship

GRADE 5

Biospheres,
food webs,
and outdoor
recreation



GRADE 6

Mountain
ecosystems,
public lands
and natural
history



Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education

Connections is coordinated through the **Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education** (WCEE), which unites schools, Tribes, agencies, and local community partners to expand equitable access to nature-based learning for students countywide.

Our coalition embodies:

- Place-based learning linked with learning standards
- Reciprocity, transparency, and shared leadership
- Equity and inclusion for all students
- Partnership with cultural and Tribal entities
- Model collaboration for healthy communities

PARTNERS

Common Threads Farm
Wild Whatcom
Nooksack Salmon
Enhancement Association
Camp Saturna
North Cascades Institute
Nooksack Indian Tribe

SPECIAL THANKS

to these funders and supporters:

Representative Alicia Rule
Whatcom Community
Foundation
Blaine and Mount Baker
School 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 K-6 students with hands-on outdoor education experiences that support classroom learning. 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 watersheds, ecology, and team-work. Sixth graders explored the inter-connection between humans and nature at Mountain School.

	MBSD Students Served	MBSD Nature Hours
Year 1	783	4,348
Year 2	908	6,715
Year 3	898	9,332
Year 4	702	5,899
TOTAL	3,291	26,294

Mount Baker School District is proud of our partnership with Connections, a program that brings high-quality outdoor and experiential learning to our students. Our rural district is surrounded by extraordinary ecological diversity and expansive public lands, yet many of our youth and families have limited opportunities to explore these spaces. Connections bridges that gap by offering engaging, hands-on outdoor learning that is both educational and inspiring.

—Bridget Rossman, Executive Director of Curriculum & Assessment, MBSD Superintendent



“The kids who don't excel in the classroom flourish here. They come out of their shells, and their critical thinking skills lock in.

—Acme Elementary Teacher

MOUNT BAKER SCHOOL DISTRICT

continued

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), **Goal 2: Operations** (Work collaboratively with Community Based Organizations and Whatcom County groups to maximize resources and foster community-wide collaboration) 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



“Camp Saturna was a terrific way for my 5th graders to cap off their year long outdoor education and salmon study. Everything was well organized, engaging, relevant to our science, and the staff did a fantastic job of meeting the needs of my group of kids.”

—Harmony Elementary Teacher

“When students can connect their learning to their own experiences and community, they are more likely to retain the information and take action in protecting it. The Salmon Program does just that—students walk away wanting to make a difference.”

—Kendall Elementary Teacher

“Garden classes offer a highly engaging learning environment where students of all abilities can shine. Gardening and harvesting inspires my students to eat healthily and be curious about food and earth sciences. They always look forward to the garden nibble at the end of the lesson!”

—Harmony 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.

Having the Connections program at Blaine Elementary gives our students hands-on experiences in the outdoors that inspire curiosity, encourage exploration, and deepen their connection to the world around them. It's a program that truly enriches their learning and their love for the environment.

—Jessie Hettinga, Principal, Blaine Elementary School

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

	BSD Students Served	BSD Nature Hours
Year 1	494	2,701
Year 2	644	7,573
Year 3	586	5,088
Year 4	330	3,470
TOTAL	2,054	18,832

The wildlife curriculum bridged well to the classroom components... Hits perfectly on the lifecycle learning standards. Spot on!

—Blaine Elementary Teacher

I have never seen a deer before. I've never been this close to a deer before.

—Blaine Elementary Student



KEEP KIDS CONNECTED

In the wake of funding impacts, we need your support!

The *Connections* program was born out of inter-district collaborative efforts to expand access to outdoor education for students facing opportunity barriers during the 2020-2021 school year. Since 2020, *Connections* has been made possible in part by Outdoor Learning Grants, which direct the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to:

- Award grants to support schools in offering outdoor learning
- Require that OSPI give priority to schools that have been underserved in science education
- Encourage the program to work with education stakeholders to develop principles for outdoor education.

The loss of nearly 85% in state funding threatens to cut off vital opportunities for students in Mount Baker and Blaine school districts.

What's at stake is not just time outside—it's all the documented benefits of environmental education such as improved mental and physical health, higher academic achievement, improved connection to peers, and decreased earnings inequality for marginalized students.

By integrating outdoor education into the school day, the *Connections* program is reducing obstacles such as cost, transportation, and lack of gear, that keep many students from accessing these benefits. Funding outdoor education is a strategy that builds essential life skills and invests in upstream solutions to the many crises that face our youth today.

“*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, Outdoor Learning Grant & Connections Program advocate

The *Connections* program is seeking gap funding through donations, funding partners, and new grant opportunities to sustain our work through the 2025-2026 school year. As we continue to diligently course-correct in service of a sustainable funding model, your support through challenging times is more appreciated than ever!

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