Mountain School is our immersive overnight environmental education program that has served regional 5th grade classes since 1990. During three days and two nights at the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center, students participate in interactive activities and lessons focused on ecosystems, geography, interconnectedness, naturalist skills, and more. While spending time outside in North Cascades National Park, participants sharpen their understanding of their own identities and discover their place in the world—as someone intricately connected within the web of all living and non-living things.

Program Outcomes

**Knowledge**

**Inspiration**

**Connection**

**Support Schools**

Student quotes are from reflective postcards, written to themselves and mailed after Mountain School.
Returning to a New Normal

Overnight Mountain School is back! The 2022-23 school year marked the first time since early 2020 that the lodges at the Learning Center were happily inhabited by 5th graders, immersed in the full overnight experience that thousands of students have participated in over the last three decades.

With the relaunch of the overnight program, we piloted a new Mountain School curriculum. In 2019, we worked with a consulting group, Three Circles Center for Multicultural Environmental Education, to begin redeveloping the curriculum. While retaining key elements of the beloved program, the new curriculum reflects our changing world through incorporating fresh perspectives and current educational best practices.

To provide quality environmental education to the diverse students who live and learn in the North Cascades ecosystem, the curriculum incorporates principles from the teaching pedagogies of student-centered instruction, social-emotional learning, multicultural education, and culturally-responsive teaching. It is intentionally designed to be customized to each group of students, “meeting them where they’re at” in terms of existing knowledge and classroom dynamics.

Our goal of supporting schools in meeting state and national education standards is achieved through the curriculum’s alignment with Washington State’s Next Generation Science Standards, Tribal Sovereignty Curriculum: Since Time Immemorial, and Social Emotional Learning Standards. Activities and lessons were intentionally aligned with relevant standards during the development process.

The new curriculum provides an updated and improved experience for students, with a program structure that remains firmly built on the principles of Place-Based Learning and Experiential Education. As it always has, Mountain School provides students with access to authentic kinesthetic learning in a way that is not possible in the traditional classroom.

88% of teachers rated the new curriculum VERY OR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE at achieving Student-Centered Instruction

84% of teachers said that the new curriculum was VERY OR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE at Recognizing and Valuing Indigenous Presence

“I believe this experience provided my students with more confidence and independence, overcoming their fears of being away from home for the first time.”
— West View Elementary teacher

“I really enjoyed watching the students explore and engage with the lessons. Having a classroom with no walls is a wonderful experience for our students.”
— Kendall Elementary teacher
Outcomes & Evaluations

To gauge the effectiveness of Mountain School and assess the impact on students, we conduct post-program teacher surveys.

Interconnectedness is a major focus of the new curriculum, centering around two essential questions: “How am I connected to the North Cascades?” and “Why does connection to a place matter?” Teachers consistently reported that the curriculum is effective in increasing students’ knowledge/sense of place:

- Increased understanding of the connection between the North Cascades and local ecosystems: 92%
- Increased understanding of public lands and National Parks: 88%
- Increased awareness of conservation issues: 92%
- Increased awareness of personal choices on the environment: 80%
- Increased understanding of humans as a part of nature: 72%
- Increased awareness of how the North Cascades plays a role where we live by the ocean: 100%

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I loved seeing kids who typically aren’t as active running around in the woods, hiking on trails, and playing at the waterfall. Priceless!
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— Parkview Elementary teacher

Teachers also reported these benefits:

- Increased leadership skills: 52%
- Increased respect for the environment: 60%
- Increased teamwork among students: 44%
- Increased responsibility for themselves: 44%
- Increased comfort being outdoors: 52%

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Participant Snapshot

To reduce barriers and increase accessibility, we prioritize the participation of full school districts and subsidize tuition on a sliding scale based on each school’s percentage of students qualifying for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- 2,398 youth participants
- 368 teachers & chaperones
- 46 schools in the North Cascades ecosystem served
- 41% identified as people of color
- 19% have disabilities
- 15% are English language learners
- 96% received financial aid
- 50% are from low-income households (qualify for free & reduced lunch)

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All students showed an increase in awareness and understanding of how the North Cascades plays a role where we live by the ocean.
— Blaine Elementary teacher

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$433K tuition subsidized by the Institute

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Participant demographics aggregated from Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data.
**Wildfire Smoke and Adaptations**

In Fall 2022, an unusually late wildfire season significantly impacted our ability to offer Mountain School. Wildfires in the North Cascades in September and October led to extreme smoke levels around Diablo Lake and at the Learning Center: the Air Quality Index was regularly over 300, which is rated as “hazardous,” and at times peaked over 800. For the first time, we had to cancel more than five weeks of Mountain School due to the smoke.

More than 100 students participated during one clear week in September, then we finally resumed the original schedule in late October after the smoke cleared. In total, despite the challenges, we served more than 600 students from 12+ schools from September through December.

The majority of the schools canceled during the smoke were from Bellingham Public Schools. We worked closely with the district to reschedule the canceled fall sessions in the spring by developing an alternative two-day/one-night program model that all Bellingham schools participated in, regardless of when they were originally scheduled. This gave us the time and space in the spring season to reschedule ALL of the Bellingham schools, which we otherwise would not have had the capacity for, and gave all 5th graders across the district an equitable Mountain School experience.

Though we do not intend to keep this shorter program format beyond extenuating circumstances such as the smoke cancellations, the Mountain School team developed an intentional and thoughtful adapted curriculum that retained as much outdoor programming as possible within the time constraints. Feedback from teachers was positive: while they missed the full program, they supported the modifications that made the experience possible for all Bellingham students to participate.