



NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

2022-2023
PROGRAM
REPORT

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

CONNECTION

to nature and fellow classmates through cooperative learning

“ I came in sad and wanting to go home, but after some fun activities, time with friends, and amazing food, it made me realize it was amazing. I will never forget my time in the North Cascades.

— Evergreen Elementary student



INSPIRATION

to continue learning and connecting with public lands and the natural world

“ Mountain School is the best... The snowy mountain tops, the beautiful river, and the amazing people who made me comfortable. I hope to come back and enjoy this place again.

— Clear Lake Elementary student



SUPPORT SCHOOLS

in meeting state and national education standards

“ Mountain School is education at its best—students collaborating in small groups with enthusiastic instructors/learners.

— Carl Cozier Elementary teacher



KNOWLEDGE

of North Cascades ecosystems and scientific processes

“ I learned more than you could possibly imagine. I learned that there is more than one type of moss. I also learned that not everything happens on a cellphone, it happens outside.

— Carl Cozier Elementary student





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.

“ 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

88%

of teachers rated the new curriculum

VERY OR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE

at achieving *Student-Centered Instruction*

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.

84%

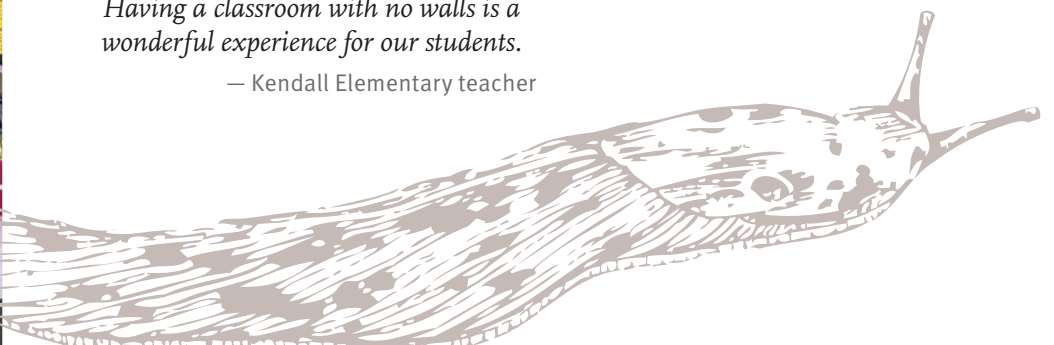
of teachers said that the new curriculum was

VERY OR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE

at *Recognizing and Valuing Indigenous Presence*

“ 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:

92% increased understanding of the connection between the North Cascades and local ecosystems

80% increased awareness of personal choices on the environment

88% increased understanding of public lands and National Parks

92% increased awareness of conservation issues

72% increased understanding of humans as a part of nature

“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

“I loved seeing kids who typically aren't as active running around in the woods, hiking on trails, and playing at the waterfall. Priceless!”

— Parkview Elementary teacher

Teachers also reported these benefits:

52% increased leadership skills

60% increased respect for the environment

44% increased teamwork among students

44% increased responsibility for themselves

52% increased comfort being outdoors

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

\$433K TUITION SUBSIDIZED by the Institute

19% Students with DISABILITIES

15% Students are ENGLISH LANGUAGE learners

96% Schools received FINANCIAL AID

50% Students are from LOW-INCOME households (qualify for free & reduced lunch)

41% Identify as PEOPLE OF COLOR

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.



Smoky conditions at the Learning Center, October 2022

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.

Partners and Major Donors

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

► PARTNERS



**Seattle
City Light**

► FUNDERS

Thank you to more than 335 generous individuals who donated to youth and school programs, particularly **Mac and Linda MacGregor** for matching funds contributed during the Mountain School appeal campaign in Fall 2022.

► GRANT FUNDERS

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