

# NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

## 2024/25

PROGRAM REPORT

**Mountain School celebrates its 35th anniversary this year!** Since 1990 and the days of “the big green tent” in Newhalem, this three-day, two-night environmental education program for 5th grade classes has welcomed more than **45,000 regional students** to the forests, watersheds, and wild wonders of the North Cascades. Now, at the comparatively luxurious North Cascades Environmental Learning Center, students continue to learn and play through hands-on, interdisciplinary lessons and activities focused on interconnectedness, cultural and natural history, ecosystems, wildfires, and more.

*“Things you need to remember about Mountain School:*

*The quiet breeze you always feel. The moonlight shining through the window. The waves rippling across the water. Having people around you... yet feeling peaceful as though you were all alone.”*

—Student, on a reflective postcard to themselves

### Program Goals

#### CONNECTION

to nature and fellow classmates through cooperative learning

#### INSPIRATION

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

#### KNOWLEDGE

of North Cascades ecosystems and scientific processes

#### SUPPORT SCHOOLS

in meeting state and national education standards







Mark Browning

## 35 Years of Outdoor Learning

Since 1990, Mountain School has been more than a field trip: it's an invitation for students to slow down, look closely, and build lasting connections with the natural world. Whether following the path of a stream, spotting deer from the trail, or studying a lichen-covered rock up close, students engage directly with the place around them—and with each other—in ways that spark curiosity and deepen care.

In the early days, Mountain School was held at Newhalem Campground along the Skagit River. Army surplus tents, including the now legendary “big green tent,” provided lodging and shelter from the elements for students after their busy days of hiking, learning, and skits in the amphitheater.

The North Cascades Environmental Learning Center opened in 2005 and became Mountain School's home. Though now sleeping in lodges rather than tents, students still spend their days immersed in the quiet forests of North Cascades National Park, forming long-lasting connections to nature. While the setting and structure have evolved over the years, Mountain School's roots have remained the same: experiential education grounded in place, relationships, and stewardship.

Mountain School's 35th anniversary is a celebration of a program that resonates across generations. Every season, we meet parent chaperones, teachers, principals, and even Institute staff (including Eric Buher, our Program Director!) who are Mountain School alumni, eager to share their own memories. We're thankful for the students, educators, staff, and community supporters who have shaped Mountain School's story, and we carry their contributions forward with pride and purpose. Here's to the next 35 years, and to continuing to grow a community of young people who feel connected to this place and inspired to care for it!

*“I attended Mountain School both as a 5th grade student and as a 5th grade teacher. This experience opened my eyes to the importance of caring for the amazing natural world around us. My memories are strong: Seeing waterfalls, massive trees, and spectacular mountain peaks; and the night hike when your senses are heightened in a unique way. I'm now inspired as an educator to teach students the responsibility of caring for our planet.”*

## Outcomes & Evaluations

To gauge the effectiveness of Mountain School and assess the impact on students, we conduct post-program teacher surveys. This year, teachers reported a wide range of benefits and impacts for their classes, including:

**90%** Equalized the learning environment for students of varying backgrounds

**58%** Increased comfort and enjoyment being outdoors

**70%** Increased respect for nature

**87%** Enhanced science learning for students

*“When students connect with nature and science in the real world, everything and everyone improves.”*



Britt Coy



**77%** Provided opportunities to build classroom curriculum around the experience

**53%** Increased teamwork and cooperation among students

**80%** Increased understanding of public lands and National Parks

“Mountain School provides one of the first opportunities for our students to engage in nature. Our school doesn’t yet have a science curriculum for K-5, so this was a chance for all students to get out and learn about science in nature.”

**93%** Increased understanding of the connection between the North Cascades and their local ecosystem

**83%** Increased awareness of personal choices on the environment

**80%** Increased understanding of humans as a part of nature

## Participant Snapshot

Participant demographics aggregated from Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction data

**1,591**

Youth Participants

**340**

Teachers & Chaperones

**36**

Schools in the North Cascades ecosystem served

**100%**

Public schools received tuition subsidies

**47%**

Students identify as people of color

**18%**

Students with disabilities

**19%**

Students are English language learners

**55%**

Students are from low-income households (qualifying for free and reduced lunch)



## Mountain School on the Road

This spring, Mountain School ventured beyond the trails of the North Cascades and into the halls of Seattle Children’s Hospital, bringing nature-based learning to young people unable to visit the mountains themselves. Led by Mountain School staff, the visit transformed hospital playrooms into pop-up discovery zones filled with wildlife pelts, natural artifacts, and hands-on activities. Patients and families connected with natural textures, stories, and science in ways that invited curiosity, comfort, and joy—even amid the challenges of medical care.

Moments like these are a powerful reminder that the heart of Mountain School isn’t tied to any

one place: it’s rooted in connection, care, and the belief that every young person deserves access to the healing power of nature wherever they may be. The program’s enduring purpose is not just to teach science or explore wild places, but to cultivate belonging, wonder, and care in every setting.

“I was a patient at Seattle Children’s Hospital in 2001, and during my stay I took part in a nature program much like the one we offered. I still remember how special it was to simply be outside, even for a little while. Returning to Seattle Children’s—this time to share hands-on outdoor education with the kids—felt like a full-circle moment, and I was deeply grateful for the opportunity to help spark the same joy, curiosity, and sense of connection with nature that meant so much to me as a young patient.” —Megan Carter, Mountain School Manager

To learn more about this special day, read *The Healing Power of Nature: Mountain School at Seattle Children’s Hospital* at [blog.ncascades.org](https://blog.ncascades.org).





## New Leadership for Mountain School

This spring, we welcomed Megan Carter (she/they) as our new Mountain School Manager! Raised in the Cascade foothills and shaped by summers on the Olympic Peninsula, Megan's love for wild places runs deep. After graduating with a degree in outdoor recreation and environmental education from Western Washington University, Megan went on to lead youth and community-based outdoor programs across Colorado, earning national recognition as a 2022 National Recreation and Park Association "30 Under 30" awardee.



*"I want every student who comes to Mountain School to feel like they matter and know they're part of something bigger and lasting. This program and others like it have helped shape who I am. Now I have the honor and the opportunity to help shape what it becomes—and the difference it can continue to make for future generations of Mountain School students."*

Megan's relationship with Mountain School began long before taking on this position. During a college visit to the Learning Center over a decade ago, they walked the trails and explored campus, thinking, "I want to work here someday." That early spark stayed with them, inspiring a dream to one day run an outdoor school program in the Pacific Northwest. Now, returning as Mountain School Manager, it feels like a meaningful full-circle moment.

# NORTH CASCADES INSTITUTE

[ncascades.org/school](https://ncascades.org/school) | (360) 854-2599 | [info@ncascades.org](mailto:info@ncascades.org)

## Partners & Supporters

Mountain School is made possible with the generous support of hundreds of organizations and individuals, including:

### PARTNERS



**Seattle  
City Light**

### MAJOR FUNDERS

Anonymous Foundation  
 Brian Scheuch Memorial Fund  
 The Eleanor and Henry Jansen Foundation  
 Ferguson Foundation  
 First Fed Foundation  
 Industrial Credit Union  
 Nisqually Indian Tribe  
 The Peach Foundation  
 Quest for Truth Foundation  
 Rotary Club of La Conner  
 Rotary Club of Mill Creek  
 Skagit Community Foundation: The L & E Donor Advised Fund, The Fisher Family Donor Advised Fund, and The Drummond Community Opportunity  
 Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission  
 Washington State Recreation & Conservation Office