



Friends of Outdoor School
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To: Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee
From: Kim Silva, Friends of Outdoor School
Date: May 8, 2023
Re: LD1817

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the distinguished Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

Please join Friends of Outdoor School and outdoor education champions in Maine and across the country in support of LD1817: Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program. Your support is critical to thousands of Maine youth, teachers, school districts, families, and the people who work for these outstanding programs.

At Outdoor School, students leave their school classrooms, moving into the outdoors to learn, immersed in nature, and led by skilled educators. Students learn about natural resources, ecosystems, and themselves. Outdoor education is an effective educational tool to teach curriculum, connect student to their local lands, and help meet the physical and emotional needs of children. Many students report that their time learning outdoors is the most powerful experience in their K-12 schooling.

Here in Oregon, voters overwhelmingly approved Measure 99 in 2016 allocating a portion of Lottery funds to send every 5th or 6th grade student to a week of Outdoor School. This funding is distributed through a grant program administered by Oregon State University Extension Service. Since 2016, over 150,000 Oregon kids have attended Outdoor School and the numbers are increasing every year! Sadly, fewer than 25% of Maine students are afforded such an opportunity.

Sustained investment in Oregon has had a hugely positive impact. Something Maine students, their families, and communities can also enjoy:

- Student access:
 - The numbers of students, schools, and districts who are participating in Outdoor School continue to increase. Stable funding is key to school districts feeling comfortable committing to the program for their students.
 - High school student leaders are gaining important leadership opportunities.
 - Outdoor School instructors and program leaders have had the opportunity to deeply examine their programs with an equity, access, and inclusion lens to improve programming and the physical environment to meet the changing needs of students and school districts.

Our Vision: Outdoor School is a place where every child can belong.

- Program improvement:
 - Oregon State University Extension Service Outdoor School has been able to conduct formal research into the benefits of Outdoor School to students. This information helps to highlight areas of program strengths and areas for improvement.
 - Students have begun to have the opportunity to provide feedback about their experience. This information allows program providers to discover ways to better meet students' needs and the needs of their communities.
 - Outdoor School staff have been able to participate in professional development improving their knowledge and skills to support and educate students.
- Workforce development: A large part of the Outdoor School workforce has moved from low-paid seasonal jobs without benefits to professional, living-wage jobs with benefits. These employees are now exploring how to become more committed in their communities such as buying homes or planning long-term careers in Oregon. Most importantly, well-paid and well-educated instructors make the experience better for kids.

Friends of Outdoor School is the key connection between Outdoor School and the larger community of individuals, businesses, community organizations, and agencies that support Oregon's statewide Outdoor School system. Our purpose is to connect, support, and advocate for all of Oregon's diverse students to learn at inclusive and accessible Outdoor School programs that contribute to educational development, inspire youth, promote personal growth, and embrace justice. Our vision is that Outdoor School is a place where every child can belong. We share in the dream that other states such as Maine provide these seminal opportunities to children and that outdoor education moves from a "nice to have" to every student's educational right.

In Oregon, families across the state – rural, suburban, and urban - rely on Outdoor School to educate and inspire their kids to create a deep and enduring connection to Oregon, their communities, and each other. This shared experience is also something that can connect the people of Maine. Please support LD1817 to ensure that every student in Maine has the opportunity to learn, grow, and discover through outdoor education experiences.

Sincerely,



Kim Silva

Executive Director

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