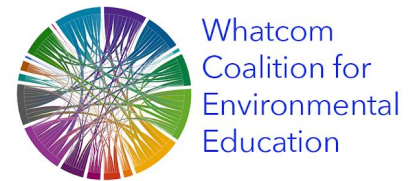


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Outdoor Educators Collaborate to Bring Students Back Online

In Whatcom County, Washington, like Counties across the nation, hundreds of students have started an “all remote” schedule without internet at home or a family member present to get them connected to school. Districts and funders are working tirelessly to provide internet access through hot spots and paying overdue bills for families. Meanwhile, the pandemic is exacerbating existing achievement gaps along with the child care and behavioral health crises.

But something unique is happening in the northwest corner of Washington State. A group of Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education (WCEE) member organizations are collaborating with districts across Whatcom County to help address these challenges. ‘Connections’ is a new program starting in three school districts, involving collaboration across thirteen organizations, district staff and local funders to provide **child care, food, and access to virtual learning** to students who can benefit most. These essential services are paired with **enriching time outdoors** in a safe and healthy environment, enabling learners to access the benefits of time spent outside with peers and trusted adults.

This comprehensive approach gets students back online and engaging with learning in new ways. According to a recent University of California at Berkeley Lawrence Hall of Science study, students experience “numerous physical and mental health benefits...from spending time in the outdoors, such as reduced stress and loneliness, and increased physical activity and resilience.”

Imagine a scenario where students who can benefit most from support for virtual learning are safely bussed to a local park or school ground where they are greeted by educators and share breakfast with their peers. Outdoor educators and district staff support students with their virtual learning assignments, provide lunch, and guide small groups in outdoors experiences - biking, walking in the woods, playing games.

Mary Sewright, Superintendent at Mount Baker School District shares, "This is a great opportunity for our students to experience outdoor education as well as get support with their remote learning."

Dr. Chris Granger, Blaine School District's superintendent echoes these sentiments, "Blaine School District is excited to be participating in the Connections program with a great group of local organizations to provide outdoor education opportunities to some of our young learners...In addition to offering support to some of our families during this pandemic, we are also grateful for our students to have this chance to view and experience the natural world around them." The Connections program is starting up in the Bellingham Public Schools as well.

"The Connections program is a bright spot in a perilous time for youth mental health and equity in education," noted Mauri Ingram, President & CEO of the Whatcom Community Foundation. "The loss of in-person instruction combined with disparities in technology access and family supports during remote learning may be worsening existing racial gaps in student outcomes and increasing stress and depression for kids. The Connections program is an antidote to many of the challenges posed by the pandemic."

The collaborations in Whatcom County across community-based organizations, district administration and a network of supportive funders including the Bellingham Public Schools Foundation, Mt. Baker Foundation, Mount Baker Student Trust, and Whatcom Community Foundation are markedly different from the paradigm of years past. Organizations are now building on each other's strengths and coordinating with district leadership to create programming for students who can benefit the most, identified by the districts. In the past, outdoor education programming in Whatcom County has been abundant and enriching, but sometimes fragmented and skewed towards schools with more resources. Collaborations operating at the district level offer a more equitable model for distribution of community assets across schools.

"The Connections programs provide an example of the incredible generosity, ingenuity, and collaboration arising from the desire to meet emergent needs and support the community during these challenging times," explains Licia Sahagun, Executive Director at Wild Whatcom. "The Bellingham Connections program not only serves students who can most benefit from additional support during remote learning, but it also provides a model for a more intentional integration of outdoor education into traditional school schedules and pathways for collective support of school districts during COVID-19. I am honored to be a part

of such a dedicated and passionate team of individuals going above and beyond to support students and families during this time.”

Wild Whatcom and **North Cascades Institute** are leading the programs across the three districts. Other participating organizations include nonprofits, businesses and agencies : **Allied Arts, Animals as Natural Therapy, Camp Saturna, Common Threads, City of Bellingham Parks and Recreation Department, Garden of the Salish Sea Curriculum, Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association, RE Sources, Vamos Outdoors Project, Whatcom Conservation District, and Whatcom Mountain Biking Coalition.** Still more organizations involved in WCEE supported the development of the model and are pooling outdoor gear resources to support the programs.

Though uncertainty still abounds, the Connections program offers a hopeful model for connecting students to learning. The program in Whatcom County can serve as a template for schools across the nation to leverage outdoor educators and spaces for healthy and equitable learning. As the pandemic exposes cracks in the systems and infrastructure around us, we can hope that the new systems we build for learners can be stronger, more equitable, and more resilient.

One teacher with students participating in the Connections program shared, “Way to go today! I took a Zoom poll yesterday asking my class how everyone was coping and half of the class said they'd ‘been better,’ but the results today were much, much more positive and I know part of it is because they're back together again ... to learn. I could see it through the camera during today's Zoom meeting that they looked much more engaged. Thank you to ... [the] team for pulling this off.”

For more information on the Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education, contact Ben Greené at 360-402-8162

