



# Outdoor School: A Sixty-Year Oregon Tradition

**A Program that Binds Oregonians Together, Raises Student Achievement  
and Builds Passionate Future Leaders and Employees**

## What is Outdoor School?

In 1957, a hands-on field science program called Outdoor School (ODS) launched in Oregon. It is an opportunity for students in fifth or sixth grade to move from their school classrooms into the outdoors to learn, immersed in nature. ODS programs are typically housed in residential camps; students stay onsite for up to five nights. While there, students learn about soil, water, plants and animals, as well as natural sciences specific to the local community and economy.

For many children, ODS is their very first experience hiking in a forest, getting their feet wet in a stream or exploring sea life along a sandy beach. For others, ODS gives them new understanding and perspectives about the natural world they thought they already knew. These experiences expand young minds and can transform lives.

## Significant research supports the benefits of ODS, such as:

- Achievement and comprehension in math and science increases
- Testing scores and attendance goes up
- Motivation to learn increases and class performance improves
- ODS programming directly supports systems thinking and STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) learning and meets state education curriculum standards
- And much more at [tinyurl.com/EmpericalEvidenceODS](http://tinyurl.com/EmpericalEvidenceODS)

## Develops Critical Thinking

An inquiry-based program, ODS is a unique chance for kids to experience the connections among living things and biological systems, such as watersheds or riparian forests. Instead of learning these concepts from a book, students develop critical thinking skills by asking questions in the field then working together to investigate, measure and report their discoveries. Students simply can't get the same natural science experience inside a classroom.

## Gets Kids Unplugged & Positively Engaged

Instead of being glued to digital screens, students conduct real-world natural science projects, nurturing a lifelong connection to the land. This is an important aspect of the program; Oregon's economy—and future—relies on supporting our natural resource industries, such as timber, tourism, outdoor recreation, farming and more. Outdoor School is a great way to teach future generations that they don't need to choose between our economy and our environment.

ODS programs often mix students from different schools and diverse backgrounds. Children share communal meals, cabins, field studies and fun within a safe, positive and inclusive environment. Guided by caring adults and role models, they learn healthy social interaction and personal expression, and how to work in a team and as a leader.

## High School Students Benefit, Too

In many programs, high school students volunteer as junior counselors (also called student leaders) to work directly with younger students while receiving guidance and feedback from staff. They gain invaluable skills relevant to work, school and life. For example, high school student leaders at MESD Outdoor School participate in a post-experience survey to determine leadership and other skill-building outcomes. The survey is aligned to career-related learning standards and American School Counselor Association (ASCA) goals. For high school students who volunteer for one week of ODS leadership, 87% said ODS made them more likely to spend time on their own in the outdoors.

Additionally, Outdoor School increased their:

- Confidence: 90%
- Public Speaking Skill: 85%
- Self-advocacy skills: 79%
- Desire to be a good student: 71%
- Interest in other volunteer opportunities: 87%
- Interest in math and science: 65%