

# How a WA Nonprofit is Reforming STEM and Connecting Schools to Agriculture & Natural Resources

Lauren Rodriguez  
Pacific Education Institute, Development Director

One student said, “I have never seen a river up close.” That was a big eye-opener. At the Pacific Education Institute (PEI), we hear comments like this from educators regularly. One such teacher is Tina Niels in Montesano, WA, who says of the struggle to get her students engaged: “Some students enjoyed science, but most saw it as another lesson with work that ‘had to be done.’ There was no connection for them.”

For PEI, it’s a hard reality to accept, so we don’t. Instead, we work with school districts to reform science programs. In 2017, PEI is included in the Washington Governor Inslee’s STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) Innovation Alliance’s Strategic Action Plan, Vision 2021: Investing in a Future Ready Washington. Our objective? To deliver our “signature, place-based agriculture and natural resource systems projects in regions, through a coalition of education, government and industry partners.”

Bill Taylor from Taylor Shellfish Farms is a PEI Board member, sponsor, and partner in the Shelton School District. Every year during PEI class activities on ocean acidification, marine debris and micro-plastics, Taylor and Little Skookum Shellfish provide tours to students and talk to them about water quality and what the shellfish industry is doing about it. Experiential education transforms, and nowhere in our State is this transformation needed more than in rural communities. The Governor’s STEM Innovation Alliance agrees: “Rural students struggle to see a future where they live, and communities need innovative youth to fulfill the promise of the growing and essential natural resource sectors.”

For these reasons, PEI has introduced a Workforce Study Bill (Senate Bill 5285) which would reveal the volume of mid-level jobs in Washington’s agriculture and natural resource sectors.

“For too long have these sectors been under-represented in number and in educational programming,” explains Kathryn Kurtz, PEI’s Executive Director and long-time educational leader. “If we’re going to make a real difference in the lives of students, we must share all local opportunities, while cultivating interest and building skills from an early age. High school is not early enough.”

Tina Niels shares how PEI’s STEM programs changed her classroom: “Students actually started asking what we were ‘doing for science’ daily! They’re all invested now.” And this greatly supports our role in making students “future-ready.”



Students learning at Taylor Shellfish Farms about the variety of job opportunities on offer within the shellfish industry.

It’s our duty, and a benefit to us all, to make this a priority. Consider supporting PEI STEM programs in your region, to infuse shellfish industry practices into local K-12 education and build interest and skills early on. Contact Lauren Rodriguez, PEI’s Development Director, to learn more: 360.705.9292 or [lrodriguez@pacificeducationinstitute.org](mailto:lrodriguez@pacificeducationinstitute.org).

*“Thank you for opening up the possibilities for students to become stewards of this great place where we live.”*

Tina Niels, 4th grade teacher, Simpson Elementary



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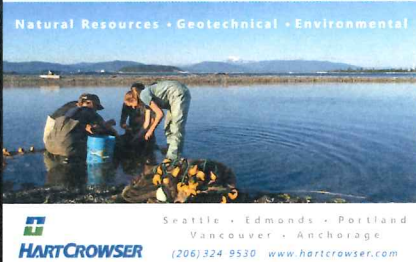
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