

“Want your children to succeed in life? Tell them to study hard and then go outside and study differently.”

- Richard Louvre, Author, *Last Child in the Woods*

Once each year, the Pacific Education Institute reaches out to join arm-in-arm with our friends and donors, so we can raise funds to deliver educational resources to Washington’s teachers and students.

It is critical that we continue working with the education community and the leadership of our state to improve how education is delivered to all students. Many individuals and organizations support our ability to deliver real-world, locally-relevant, integrated science education to our schools. Some of those donors are the very people who benefit from our work. And their stories and reasons for donating inspire us.

One such donor is Heather Sisson, an elementary teacher and curriculum expert. In September, she shared a heartfelt story. It was her story—as a teacher, as a teacher mentor, as a science enthusiast, as a believer in the potential of all children, and as a supporter of PEI. We asked her, “Why?” And this was her answer:



Heather: “This little guy sat there alone for more than 15 minutes, recording everything he saw. It’s one of my favorite photos.”

“I believe that our children come to us with intrinsic curiosity. They are born scientists, making sense of the world by testing theories and asking questions. It’s beautiful to witness a child making sense for herself; her eyes get big when she figures something out. It’s what teachers I mentor say is the reason they teach—the ‘Ah-ha!’ moment.

Eventually, our little scientists head into school. They have a small window of time to decide whether they will continue asking questions and search to build meaning for themselves, or whether they’ll begin to lean on others to tell them why and how things really are.

I believe most scientifically-literate adults have maintained the wonder they carried with them when they entered school, developing into creative thinkers and problem solvers. And for many, their questions were respected and developed with support from adults who aimed at fostering curiosity. As a result, they continued to ask ‘Why?’

I believe children should not be denied these experiences because of their zip codes, family situations, or poor advocacy of the adults around them. Science encourages collaboration, discourse, evidence seeking, and reflection in students of all ages. It is the great equalizer. Students don’t have to wait for a

certain developmental level to engage in ‘real science.’ Science allows students to approach learning at whatever level of expertise they have when they first engage, to build meaning in a space where mistakes are steps to learning, and to celebrate the journey regardless of whether they’ve yet arrived at the answer. And I’ve realized just how important providing these kinds of experiences in school and for all students really is.

During my first year in this role, I joined a 5th grade class that went out water quality testing. Students were so engaged. But it was when I asked groups of children, ‘What was the coolest part of your day?’ that I was sadly surprised. While many said they felt like real scientists and that they liked applying what they’ve been studying in class, nearly a quarter of the students said their favorite part was just being out near big trees. In Thurston County,

five of them had never been around trees that tall, and two said they had not been to a creek or the ocean. These were students of twelve years old. And my heart broke right then and there.

Gone are the days of assuming children have had common experiences when they begin school. It has become a big part of my job to tie equitable outdoor experiences to academics. PEI's values align with my work and my purpose to make science and outdoor experiences accessible to all children. Thankfully in our district, we now have goals where all students will experience an ecosystem in each grade level. I'm not sure I could have done this without the tools PEI provides.

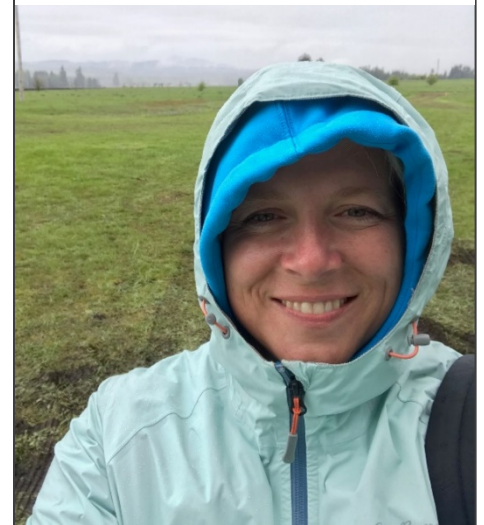
FieldSTEM is a whole different level of 'field trip.' It engages students out in the field as adults are engaged in life—balancing multiple observations and perspectives, the process swerves, and changes based on new information. It's respectful of what students know, responsive to what they've learned, and adaptable for all the possibilities. That's the power of FieldSTEM.

I support PEI as a donor for multiple reasons. One is my belief around students' rights in their education, and I've seen firsthand what happens when they head outside and learn away from their desks. It's remarkable. This summer, I also become a facilitator and curriculum writer with PEI. I choose to spend my 'extra energy' with them because it truly feeds my soul.

PEI's staff are as impassioned as I am about things I care about most in education.

There is a lot of work to be done and support needed to create meaningful, equitable, and sustainable learning experiences for our young students. They'll be the stewards who decide priorities in our country. They depend on us to act in ways that are truly in their best interests, including to nudge them outdoors in our increasingly digital age. I'm so happy to have the support of PEI and their educational resources as we work toward these important goals."

Heather admits she is rarely the one being photographed, and loves taking photos of her students outdoors, doing real science.



This year, we ask you to help Heather and all the educators we serve to make equitable, engaging, real-world education for *all students* a priority. To provide those common experiences that blur differences among students and help more children succeed.

In a time when academic scores are decreasing, children are losing their connection with the natural world, and doors are closing on many of them, we must act. Let's support good education—the great equalizer—and ensure *all students* get to learn among big trees.

If you agree every child should have access to better, more integrated science education that offers priceless opportunities to learn outdoors away from their desks, and regular opportunities to develop their sense of place, [please consider a donation that is personally meaningful to you](#)—or a monthly contribution that we can count on and put toward equitable education throughout the year.

Warm holiday wishes from Heather and her teachers, and all of us at PEI!



Kathryn Kurtz
Executive Director



Lauren Rodriguez
Development Director