

On Track Academy is an Urban Forestry Pioneer
Spokane School Among First ‘Tree Campus K-12 Founding Campuses’ in U.S.

In a year of chaos and uncertainty, one high school in Spokane is serving as an example of what’s possible, even under difficult circumstances. The On Track Academy (OTA) is among nine schools around the county to be named a Founding Campus in the Arbor Day Foundation’s new Tree Campus K-12 recognition program.

“We’re really proud of the work that’s being done at this school,” says Logan Donahoo, Tree Campus K-12 Program Manager. “This project is completely in alignment with our mission of inspiring people to plant, nurture and celebrate trees. They’re getting students involved in understanding the local tree canopy and figuring out their role in designing this new area that’s adjacent to their campus.”

Funds for this Urban Forestry Correlations program were provided by the USDA Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry Program, administered through the State of Washington Department of Natural Resources Urban and Community Forestry Program. The Pacific Education Institute (PEI) facilitated the collaborative effort between OTA, the City of Spokane’s Urban Forestry Department and the Arbor Day Foundation. PEI provides professional learning opportunities to teachers statewide. FieldSTEM®, their award-winning educational model, supports K-12 educators statewide in getting students outdoors to engage in locally relevant STEM learning. In 2020, PEI held an Urban Forest Correlations workshop with 33 OTA teachers to provide them with tools and resources they could use with students. Ten attended a second session to explore the topic more deeply.

With the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, hands-on learning became more challenging, but the staff persevered in their virtual classrooms. Students did tree counts around their neighborhoods, took photos and shared memories and interests related to trees. “That’s where I started seeing higher levels of engagement,” says teacher Matt Moureaux. “They were sharing memories of swinging, climbing or sitting in trees. It builds community when they’re sharing similar ideas and they began to feel more comfortable with one another.”

In the next phase, students use i-Tree, a combination of science and free tools that quantifies the benefits and values of trees such as water conservation, shade, carbon sequestration, and providing habitat for wildlife. “I think that was eye-opening to a lot of students,” says Moureaux. “They got to see numbers and data that they could wrap their heads around.”

The focus of their research was environmental justice. OTA is in northeast Spokane, which has notably less tree canopy than more affluent areas of the city. “The idea of environmental equity has been an issue in urban forestry for a long time,” says Donahoo. “The Arbor Day Foundation is trying to provide training and tools to our community partners to help them infuse these concepts of equity and justice into tree planting work. With this project, they were already looking at it through that lens from the start.”

Based on what they had learned, the students began contacting community groups and putting together presentations to recommend where trees could be planted around their neighborhood to provide the greatest benefit. Several participated (via Zoom) in a neighborhood council meeting. Talia Bender, a Junior at OTA, was one of them. “They listened to us and took us seriously,” she says. “It’s been good to get outside of my comfort zone and benefit our community as well.”

The project was a natural fit for OTA, according to Principal Lisa Mattson. “We have a history of giving back to the community and have a deep interest in any way that we can make change around environmental issues,” she explains. “This was also perfect timing because after twelve years in portable classrooms, we’re going to move into a state-of-the-art, beautiful facility and the students have made it very clear that they want access to nature.”

City of Spokane Assistant Director of Natural Resources Angel Spell and Urban Forester Katie Kosanke helped students understand the many considerations necessary when determining placements for planting trees, including underground utilities. “We appreciate the collaboration and partnerships so much because they fill in gaps,” says Kosanke. “The people at On Track Academy and PEI have the skills and the connections we simply don’t have.” Usually, the

department focuses on adult public education for homeowners, neighborhood councils and community boards so the collaboration with OTA offered a rare chance to work with students.

Kosanke oversees the city's forestry program, which includes tree planting. "We can't do that alone," she says. "We rely on partnerships and programs like this one to find homes for the trees and get them in the ground. This project is fantastic because it's helping us achieve the things we want to do with fewer resources. We hope to see it replicated."

The project will culminate in April 2021 with students planning to plant 24 trees at locations around their school neighborhood. In the coming year, another DNR grant will fund an expansion of the program into nearby Regal Elementary School and Shaw Middle School. Meanwhile, OTA has developed a partnership with SpoCanopy, a new program through the City of Spokane's Urban Forestry department in collaboration with The Lands Council. SpoCanopy's focus is to ensure every person in every neighborhood in the city has access to trees and green space. "Through our collaboration with SpoCanopy, we're going to be the education arm and we're going to work together to plant even more trees. That's the beauty of synergy and partnership."

Bender still has one year left as a student but she's already making plans. "I want to see more trees around the dry areas of Spokane, and I would love to see On Track get more opportunities in the future," she says. "I want to do as much as I can to help benefit trees and nature and would like to have a job related to the environment."