

## PEI's YESS! Program Forges Career Pathways for Economically Disadvantaged High School Students

As the new year begins, green jobs are part of a growing conversation around how to create a sustainable economy. Preparing K-12 students for these jobs is essential, but for high school students with packed academic schedules, providing green jobs training has



been a challenge. Economically disadvantaged students are even less likely to pursue such pathways, given their need to work during the summer. Few paid opportunities for both training and academic credit have existed - until now. The Highline School District and Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust partnered to pilot a six-week course that trained high school students in restoration ecology in collaboration with community partners. The pilot was so successful that in 2022, PEI expanded the concept to other courses and launched Youth Engaged in Sustainable Systems (YESS!).

This summer the program is expanding to eight locations and will include programs with the restoration ecology focus and a forest management focus. Participants will earn high school credits, a document of competency for skills gained signed by local employers, and a participation stipend. Some courses also provide credits with Career and Technical Colleges.

YESS! prioritizes school districts that have a high percentage of low-income students, and places with high levels of environmental health disparity in comparison to the rest of Washington State. Because economically disadvantaged youth can't afford to take a summer off from work to explore potential career opportunities, the stipend ensures they don't have to. "In similar

programs, kids volunteer or get scholarships,” says PEI Executive Director Kathryn Kurtz, “but what we’re saying upfront is that everyone gets paid, and everyone can increase their education attainment.”



Community partners identify and schedule projects and sites under their management and contribute natural resource and conservation professionals to lead work crews. They also sign the Document of Competency each student receives at the end of the course. Recently PEI held a phone meeting with representatives from multiple conservation districts and land trusts as well as the U.S. Forest Service. “They were all looking at this document listing the skills the kids

are going to get from this course,” Kurtz explains, “to make sure that the skills listed would be valuable to them as employers.”

In 2022, PEI is working with many agencies and community organizations to implement the program with districts throughout the state. Five locations will offer the Restoration Ecology course, while three locations will be offering the Forest Management course. In the coming year, PEI will also develop a third course focused on renewable energy.