

Spokane Students Use PEI Tools to Explore Wildfire Mitigation and Tree Benefits

By: Heidi Smith

Students in Spokane School District's On Track Academy (OTA) expanded their knowledge of forest management this spring through tree planting, a three-week unit focused on urban forestry and wildfires and a campus symposium on tree benefits open to the public. The forestry unit and symposium were collaborative efforts between On Track Academy high school students and 5th graders from nearby Regal Elementary School.

OTA's Jeremy Lenhartzen and Lori Beaty team teach the class that studied topics like forest carbon sequestration, tree benefits and wildfire mitigation. The experience was illuminating, says Lenhartzen. "Many of these kids couldn't go to recess at times when they were growing up because the smoke from wildfires was so bad," he says. "They never realized there was a solution and they felt empowered to think about ways the problem can be solved."



The class used training and materials from PEI, including a wildfire simulation activity using steel wool, cotton and match sticks on a steeply sloped surface. Students also heard from a DNR fuel specialist and other forestry professionals about how the simulation plays out in real life. "The speakers helped them see that maybe forest management or becoming a park ranger is something they'd like to do," Beaty explains. "They learned that those opportunities exist."

For Regal Elementary School students, working with their high school counterparts was equally inspiring, teacher Lucas Turnkey notes. "They saw the older students as role models and peers. The interactions between them deepened student en-

gagement for both groups and deepened student knowledge and understanding of the topics we were learning about.” His class also studied tree benefits and wildfire mitigation. At the campus symposium, Regal and OTA students handed out 1,000 free trees and shared information about what they’d learned.

A separate OTA class planted 19 street trees in collaboration with the City of Spokane after identifying the most beneficial locations to place them. The project allowed students to get involved with their community, says teacher Nate Ziegler. “I had students who hate academics but were completely engaged in these field trips,” he maintains. “It gave them a moment to shine, and they also learned a ton about the benefits of tree canopies.”

