

Olympia School District

Environmental Literacy Funds Fuel Invasive Species Removal, Outdoor Classroom and School Gardens at Olympia School District

The first time 30 Marshall Middle School students attempted to clear scotch broom and blackberry from an area of their campus to improve salmon habitat, they didn't have the proper equipment. In the words of Thomas Condon, Science, Social Studies and Horticulture teacher in the school's Citizen Science Program (CSI), "The scotch broom was as large as tree trunks. It was like trying to do a root canal with tweezers."

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY



ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY PROJECT

Thanks to Environmental Literacy funding, the next effort will involve heavy machinery. Marshall was one of two schools within the Olympia district awarded grants this spring and Environmental Literacy funds will cover three projects on their campus: professional development for teachers, a stone council ring in the school garden, and rental fees for equipment to remove invasive species and replace them with topsoil.

Professional development will familiarize teachers with GRuB's Tend, Gather, Grow curriculum and expand access to outdoor and project-based learning. Just 60 of Marshall's 450 students are enrolled in the three-year CSI program, but in 2021 the school piloted a two-year project-based learning model in which teachers work as a team. "Now we can reach 400 kids to do ecosystem restoration and projects," says Condon.

The granite circle will serve as a gathering place and outdoor classroom for lessons on growing traditional Salish foods, Traditional Ways of Knowing and native plants. It will also function as a tool for innovative math assignments. In a nod to Stonehenge, the stone's diameter, multiplied by a factor of ten, will roughly equal the earth's circumference. (Olympia is not Salisbury, but Condon has challenged his students to meet him at sunrise on the summer solstice to watch the sun come up and celebrate with a large breakfast. So far, he has ten takers).

Invasive species removal is part of a Campus Watershed Restoration Project aimed at empowering students to become environmental stewards by improving a portion of the Green Cove Watershed. Students will learn how the campus can sequester more carbon, filter polluted runoff, and recharge groundwater and develop an understanding of how this contributes to restoring depleted salmon populations. Without Environmental Literacy funding, all three projects would have been delayed or scaled back, according to Condon. "We were going to have to remove the invasive species by hand," he says. "Things would have slowed way down."

At nearby Hansen Elementary School, equipment purchased with Environmental Literacy funding will also play an important role. The Hansen Forest, formerly maintained by one passionate teacher and her students, has become overgrown and neglected. Likewise, the school garden sits mostly idle throughout the year unless one of the teachers brings gardening equipment from home, creating a piecemeal approach to garden-based curriculum.

When 4th and 5th-grade teacher Hattie Osborne surveyed the staff to find out why they weren't using the forest and the garden, the most common reason was the lack of tools. "We didn't have the resources to make the forest a more usable space," Osborne explains. "We didn't have shovels, gardening gloves for the kids, wagons to haul things or seeds."

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Environmental Literacy funding is filling in those gaps. Having the necessary equipment available will make it much easier for teachers to integrate the garden and forest into their daily lessons. "This will give people access," says Osborne. "They won't have to bring supplies from home. The equipment is there for them to do that work. Without it, we couldn't have moved forward at all."