



Preparing Students for Natural Resource Careers through the New Youth Engaged in Sustainable Systems (YESS) Program

By Heather Spalding, Tressa Arbow and Megan Rivard

This summer, students from four Washington school districts strengthened their career readiness skills through PEI's new Youth Engaged in Sustainable Systems (YESS) Program. YESS is part of Career Connect Washington, a coalition of industry, labor, and community leaders who are creating work-based and academic programs for youth. Through YESS, students explore, learn, receive stipends, and earn high school or college credit. Together, this year's programs connected with more than 15 partners and completed restoration projects at dozens of sites on both sides of the Cascades.

The YESS Program model is grounded in collaboration between PEI, school districts, skill centers, and local natural resource organizations. Over five to six weeks in the program, students' classroom time is paired with hands-on service activities at community partner sites. Students' learning is directly tied to the projects they accomplish in the field.

Upon course completion, teachers provide each student with a signed “document of competency” that rates their proficiency in a variety of entry-level industry-related skills. These documents of competency were designed by PEI and Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust with guidance from employers and research on natural resource workforce development trends. Students can use this document to craft their resumes and better articulate their skills when applying for jobs.

2022 Program Highlights:

Eisenhower High School (Yakima School District) Pilot Program

Eisenhower High School's YESS students spent the summer traveling around Central Washington with Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group (MCFEG) and their incredible restoration partners. Students also worked on a restoration plan for a section of nearby Randall Park and put the skills they learned with each community partner to the test, from plant identification to weeding, mulching and planting. Students also talked with panels of professionals to learn more about the work of Tribal and other state agencies.

“The growth we have seen [in the students] is unbelievable” said teacher Robin Driver. The passion, drive, and engagement of the students was on full display for the school board, principal, and community during end-of-program presentations. “We couldn’t have done any of this without MCFEG. Merritt Mitchell-Wajeesh [Outreach and Communications Manager] organized and connected us with all the community partners and field experiences,” Driver said.



Eisenhower High School students

Of all the phenomenal experiences over the 6-week session, students cite the Melvin R. Sampson Coho Salmon Hatchery in Ellensburg as the highlight of their summer. There, students got a hands-on and up-close experience pit tagging coho smolt. They then hopped into trucks and traveled into the hills to release the fish into their home stream. This site visit was even featured in The Yakima Herald.

Riverview School District

The Riverview team partnered with organizations that included Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust, King County Department of Natural Resources, the United States Forest Service (USFS), and the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe. Students reported appreciation for the opportunity to visit sites that included Lake Sammamish, Franklin Falls, and the Meadowbrook riparian area. Throughout the course, they learned about map reading and riparian restoration. The students also became familiar with and practiced safety skills, explored their career preferences, and worked on their resumes in the classroom. Teacher Dana Koukol attested to the positive growth she observed in each student over the course of the summer and shared her enthusiasm for this program to continue in future years.



Riverview ecological restoration crew

Students presented their final proposals to community partners, family, and friends at the Snoqualmie Valley Youth Recreation Center. In addition to sharing information about the current conditions of the sites, students created detailed restoration plans that included

specific species to remove and plant, an estimated budget for the proposal, and monitoring plans. In addition to information about the current conditions of the sites, students created detailed restoration plans that included specific species to remove and plant, an estimated budget for the proposal, and monitoring plans. To gather budget details, students had to research various plant vendors and prices, collect information about labor wages, and calculate the cost of gas and tools. All presenters chose plant species that would thrive within the site, accounting for local weather patterns, soil conditions, slope of land, and presence of humans and wildlife. Student Ricky Pearce said, “During this program, I’ve learned so much about everything outdoors from site management, data collection, riparian zones, ecosystems, ecological restoration, environmental justice, and watersheds. I used to dislike outdoor work, but after this program, I’ve started to consider an outdoor career”.

Highline School District

Highline School District’s YESS Program was also designed in partnership with the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust. Over the summer, students helped restore sites such as Lake Sammamish, Stossel Creek, and the Salmon Creek Ravine with the City of Burien’s Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Services (PaRCS) office.

They also completed trail maintenance at Franklin Falls with USFS staff. After a morning spent hauling and tamping gravel for hiking paths, students participated in a lunchtime Q+A session with the trail maintenance staff that focused on USFS career opportunities.

Partway through the program, Highline students completed an overnight



Highline students doing trail maintenance



backpack that started and ended at Waskowitz Environmental Leadership School (WELS). Throughout the program, students built their endurance with hikes that increased in length.

Students presented their final restoration plans and celebrated their successes at WELS on the last day of the program, Riverview's students attending to cheer them on. Highline participant Jayden Lolagi said, "My relationship with all the agencies has changed. Before, I didn't really take interest in this type of work, but the agencies I've worked with really opened my eyes to opportunities". Fellow student Monsetrrath Trinidad Bello said, "[The program] helped me narrow down my options in what career I want in life and what I can do to get there. I want to be in many more internships and see what else I do or don't like. I loved my experience in this program".

North Thurston School District Pilot Program

North Thurston students interacted with the Billy Frank Jr. National Wildlife Refuge, Capitol Land Trust, Nisqually River Education Project, and Thurston Conservation District. In the classroom at Timberline High School, they learned about land management, environmental justice, aquatic ecology. Teacher Dave Ohrt led a



***North Thurston students at the
Nisqually River***

conversation about designing a resume and searching for a job. He also hosted mock interviews with each student.

Partway through the course, PEI's Multilingual Coordinator Lourdes Flores visited the program to share her own career exploration pathway with the students. Lourdes described her experiences as a student in Mexico City and how she decided to study marine

biology in college before working on a variety of west coast conservation projects, educational initiatives, and now developing multilingual programs in Washington through her position at PEI. Participant Naliya Rubin said, “I learned that jobs in ecological restoration can be really interesting and even considered looking into them in the future. I learned special skills with tools and test kits. I also fostered my observational skills and sense for nature.” Calvin Ojennus also shared, “My experience with this program was amazing. I learned about how to better communicate and work in groups”.

Want to launch a YESS Program at your school, district, or skills center?

Want to launch a YESS Program at your school, district, or skills center? PEI is currently accepting applications for the 2023 YESS Program. Learn more, attend one of our interest sessions, and apply to launch a YESS program through your school, district, or skills center. Submit your application to participate in 2023 by Friday, October 14th. Interest sessions (each meeting will include the same agenda, and districts only need to attend one date):

-Tuesday, September 20th from 10-11 am [Register Here](#)

-Monday, October 3rd from 2-3 pm [Register Here](#)

Community organizations and industry leaders should contact PEI's Green Jobs Coordinator (hspalding@pacifieducationinstitute.org) to discuss partnership opportunities.