

Bellingham School District

Bellingham's Community Partners Help to Expand Sustainability Education District-Wide

At public schools, the amount and degree of sustainability education students get can vary substantially, even within the same district. Resources such as community partnerships, staff training and access to natural areas all play a role. In Bellingham Public Schools (BPS), district leaders are addressing that challenge through a collaboration with the Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education (WCEE), a group of local nonprofits that works to increase equity and collective capacity in environmental education. "As a district, we've been working on ways to help all our K-8 students have comprehensive,

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY



ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY PROJECT

hands-on experiences over time,” says grant writer Gretchen Pflueger.

To achieve that goal, the district is using Environmental Literacy funding to support projects that incorporate two WCEE member organizations, Common Threads and Wild Whatcom, with a focus on school gardens and local ecosystems. Common Threads will provide K-5 students at the district’s five Title I elementary schools with garden and food education lessons. First and second graders in four of those schools will also experience EdVentures, a Wild Whatcom program that gets students outdoors for lessons in observation, habitats and stewardship. Wild Whatcom’s SEED program engages students with significant disabilities in the district’s Life Skills and BRIDGES classrooms; they go outdoors for science, communication and life skills learning.

“We want our students to have more access to the outdoors while at school,” says Pflueger. “With both programs, they can go into wooded areas or to a pond that’s close to the school. It’s helping them understand that you can experience nature and talk about climate, plants and ecosystems just by stepping out your back door.”

Funding for these programs is braided and often includes grants. Community partners also provide support through fundraising and grants they receive, which will supplement the Environmental Literacy funding.

In the long term, BPS plans to use professional development to increase teacher confidence, capacity, knowledge and interest in implementing outdoor-based STEM. “Our big picture goal is to equip our teachers with pedagogies and strategies to feel comfortable working with students outside,” says Pflueger. “We’re looking to our community partners to be models for our staff so they can do these kinds of excursions on their own.”