

Peninsula School District

New Pavilions and Benches Enhance Outdoor Learning at Evergreen Elementary School

When the former Evergreen Elementary School building was demolished in 2020, the rebuilding process provided a perfect opportunity for the staff to consider ways to integrate outdoor-based STEM learning. In place of the old school, there was now a clear, undeveloped area adjacent to the new campus. Yet while it was an ideal outdoor classroom in some ways, the space lacked both protection from the elements and seating. Environmental Literacy funds have provided both shelter and benches, critical first steps in making the area accessible for both teachers and students.

The Environmental Literacy funds purchased four 13 x 11 pavilions and 24 half-log

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY



ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY PROJECT

benches which all grades can use, including a new Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program for students who aren't quite ready for traditional school. The TK program was part of the initial inspiration for outdoor learning, according to Amy Barber, STEM Integration Specialist for Peninsula School District. "The district wants those kids to have a lot more outdoor education," she says, "so the kindergarten teacher and I visited some outdoor schools and came back excited about getting this rolling."

The space is part of the district's long-term plan to provide outdoor-based professional learning experiences to all teachers. These include workshops and ongoing support from Pacific Education Institute (PEI), West Sound STEM and Olympic ESD 113. Evergreen Elementary staff will use the space to focus on one or two Environmental Literacy standards at each grade level through hands-on lessons that emphasize stewardship and interconnection.

Environmental Literacy funds were essential to getting the project started, according to Barber. Evergreen Elementary is the only Title I school in PSD, with 74% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches. That makes fundraising a challenge. "If we hadn't received the Environmental Literacy funds, this project would never have gotten off the ground," she explains. "The teachers didn't want to even think about it until there was a teaching space to use. We would have been seeing who could donate lumber and dealing with permitting issues. Instead, we have these kits that we can put together in early September so we can be ready to take students outside."

The outdoor space will also serve a related OSPI initiative. A group of Evergreen teachers has been accepted into OSPI's STEM Integration Pilot Program, where they will receive training to implement two integrated STEM units into their yearly instructional plan, collaborating with other teams across the state and providing feedback to OSPI leadership. The entire staff is committed to providing integrated STEM experiences to students, particularly given the lack of access to STEM resources low-income students typically experience.

A separate STEM Lighthouse grant from OSPI will cover the cost of weather stations, magnifying glasses, clipboards, whiteboards, animal track fossils and \$10,000 worth of native plants, as well as raised garden beds and compost bins. "This is going to be a long process," says Barber, "but it's an exciting dream to think of what's going to be here for these kids."