

## Students and Legislators Mutually Inspired at Sustainability Summit

by Heidi Smith

Students from thirteen Washington schools had an adventure they will not soon forget this January. According to one of their teachers, “The experience will continue to impact them as they proceed through school and life.”



*Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal learning about the Glenwood School's project on composting. Photo courtesy of OSPI.*

They attended a statewide Environmental & Sustainability Literacy Student Summit co-hosted by PEI and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). The summit recognized the work of sixteen student groups to explore and take action on issues related to environmental stewardship, sustainability and climate change. Students gathered at the Lacey Community Center on January 25 from far-flung communities like Marysville, Pullman and Taholah as well as nearby districts like Olympia. They ranged in age from second grade to high school.

Teams shared their projects with other groups and with the legislators and agency leaders who attended the event, including Governor Jay Inslee, Office of Native Education Director Henry Strom, Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal, Representative Alicia Rule, Nisqually Tribe member Hanford McCloud and Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission Executive Director Justin Parker. Some of the teams traveled to the state capitol the following day to meet with legislators from their districts, share information about their projects and ask questions about sustainability and climate science. One student later shared, “My biggest takeaway was how much climate change work people are doing behind the scenes. That’s easy to miss.”



*Office of Native Education President Henry Strom visits Thurgood Marshall Middle School students’ booth on the return of salmon to the Elwha River. Photo courtesy of OSPI.*

“My students LOVED connecting with the government and OSPI officials who were at the event on Thursday,” says one teacher. “They were really excited to share with Superintendent Reykdal and the congressperson who was in attendance.”

“This will definitely be the highlight of our year, and it may turn out to be the highlight of our students’ middle school experience,” says another. “Our team put together an excellent project and poster and was completely jazzed by their opportunity to meet the governor and the honor of representing their school. They had a positive STEM experience and will feed that energy back into our school.”

Project topics included habitat restoration, microplastics and legislation, safe drinking water, compost to sea level rise, indigenous solutions to environmental problems, native seeds and restoration and raising backyard chickens. Students from the Quileute Tribal School in La Push set out to determine what was causing birds to crash into the windows on their campus – and how to stop that behavior. Their project led them to understand the impact of light pollution and a solution which saved their school district money on their electric bill.



*The student team from Heritage High School in Marysville shared information on Indigenous Solutions to Environmental Problems. Photo courtesy of OSPI.*

Students from Quileute Tribal school expressed that they were impressed by the number of other youth from tribes they could interact with and that they were especially grateful for the number of indigenous speakers who shared culturally relevant words.

South Puget Sound Community College, Washington State Opportunity Scholarship, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife and Zonta Club of South Puget Sound sponsored the summit and shared information with students and their teachers throughout the day. Guest and keynote speakers included McCloud, Governor Inslee, Strom, Parker and Representative Rule.

“The most rewarding moment for me was listening to the students and hearing how passionate they were about their projects,” says PEI’s Associate Director of Puget Sound Molly Griffiths. “They were excited to be there and share their learning with others.” Griffiths spent months organizing the event and coordinating student teams.

Legislators were equally inspired by the students’ presentations. All of the guest speakers touched on how energizing it was to see students of all ages engaged in learning about their local ecosystems and how to care for them.



*South Whidbey School District’s ALE program brought three student teams. This one’s focus was salmon-friendly gardening. Photo courtesy of OSPI.*



*Pullman High School's team shared information about native seeds and restoration.*

The effects have lingered, according to East Olympia Elementary School teacher Jane Rizika. “My students are eager to share their experience and learning from the summit with peers,” she says. “They continue to push themselves and create new challenges. The team is also planning to participate in the fifth grade Genius Hour on April 19th, where parents can come in and see all of our class projects.



*Students learned about other team's projects during a 'scavenger hunt' activity.*

Each team member is looking into a second topic of interest where they can pay it forward, make a difference or just have a voice regarding the environment and sustainability. All students have gotten inspired by their peers' projects and it is wonderful to see all the learning that is happening.”

Meanwhile, Griffiths has just one comment as she looks ahead to the 2025 Student Summit. “It needs to be bigger!”