

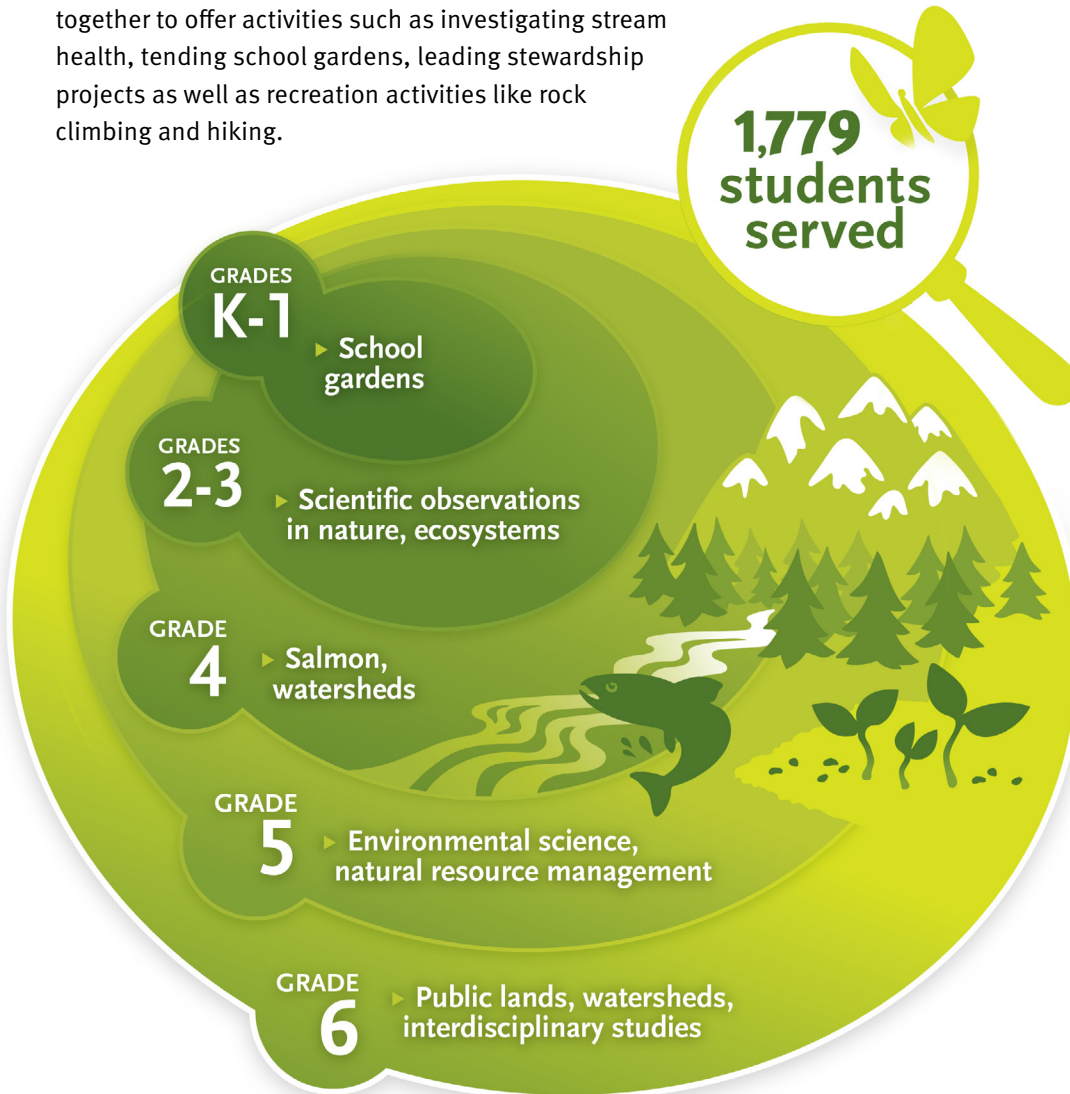
CONNECTIONS

2021-2022
OUTCOMES
REPORT

Connecting students to outdoor learning opportunities through community partnerships

Connections aims to support every K-6 student in Mount Baker and Blaine School Districts with 5-10 hours of outdoor instruction on school grounds, at local parks, and off-site at Silver Lake and in North Cascades National Park during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.

A coalition of five collaborating organizations are coming together to offer activities such as investigating stream health, tending school gardens, leading stewardship projects as well as recreation activities like rock climbing and hiking.



Our unique approach consolidates community resources to provide a strategic pathway so that students at each grade level build inquiry skills and engage in scientific practices during supported interactions with the local environment. The primary goals of this project are to foster **environmental stewardship and joyful habits of outdoor exploration** that are strongly linked to academic and socio-emotional learning.

LEARN MORE [WhatcomEnvironmentalEducation.com/ConnectionsProgram](https://www.whatcomenvironmentaleducation.com/connectionsprogram)

PURPOSE

- ▶ Serve all Mount Baker and Blaine School District students, grades K-6
- ▶ Provide locally-focused outdoor education linked with learning standards
- ▶ Connect students to their environment
- ▶ Help rural school districts leverage local resources and expertise
- ▶ Model collaboration for a healthy community

PARTNERS

- ▶ [Common Threads Farm](#)
- ▶ [Wild Whatcom](#)
- ▶ [Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association](#)
- ▶ [Camp Saturna](#)
- ▶ [North Cascades Institute](#)



SPECIAL THANKS

to these funders and supporters:

- ▶ Representative Alicia Rule
- ▶ Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office
- ▶ Blaine and Mount Baker Schools Districts

MOUNT BAKER SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Connections program in Mount Baker School District (MBSD) began in September 2021 with our Coalition of community partners providing hands-on outdoor education in an array of topics for nearly every student grades K-6.

All grades received **gardening lessons**. Second and third graders learned about **ecosystems, adaptation, and habitats**. Fourth graders learned about **salmon life cycle and habitat**. At Silver Lake, fifth graders deepened understanding of **biospheres and watersheds**. Sixth graders conducted **science experiments and stewardship projects** at Whatcom Falls Park.

“As a rural school district encompassing 622 square miles, surrounded by forest, rivers, and mountains, we believe in the power of our outdoor classroom yet lack the expertise to fully utilize it. We are thrilled to partner with these community organizations to provide outdoor, educational lessons that integrate healthy habits, scientific inquiry, and social-emotional learning.

— Bridget Rossman, Mount Baker School District Curriculum Director



1,026
OUTDOOR
INSTRUCTION HOURS



1,335
STUDENTS SERVED

4,400
NATURE HOURS

Outdoor Instruction Hours: Staff hours provided times number of classrooms
Nature Hours: Hours spent outside times number of students

Alignment with MBSD Strategic Plan 2020-2025: The Connections program aligns with **Next Generation Science Standards** as well as MBSD's Strategic Plan **Goal 1: Learning and Teaching** (*Leverage the power of the Mount Baker community; including people, natural resources and rich local history to engage, equip and empower students with skills needed to impact and strengthen local, regional, and global communities*) and **Goal 5: Community Engagement** (*Establish and cultivate strong bonds with our Mount Baker community while honoring diverse family cultures to enrich the educational program*).

Alignment with Priority Supports for Students Identified by District:

- Building Relationships
- Early Learning (K-4 literacy)
- Extended Day Partnerships (CBOs)
- Extracurricular Activities
- Multi-tiered System of Supports
- SEL and Mental Health Supports

STUDENT IMPACTS

“My 3rd grade students enjoyed **exploring trails, learning about the plants and animals, and playing fun games together.**”

—3rd Grade Teacher, Acme Elementary



“... An invaluable impact on my students' well-being. I have watched **a selectively nonverbal first grader light up and begin to speak** while she worked in the school garden.”

—Teacher, Kendall Elementary

“**Very meaningful experience for my students.** My students loved planting trees!”

—4th Grade Teacher, Harmony Elementary

BLAINE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Despite delays due to concerns about COVID-19 safety and staffing constraints, our Coalition stayed in close communication with Blaine School District (BSD) to adapt programming to a later start date and include after school program options. The Connections programs launched in March 2022 and included **ecosystem and adaptation lessons**, outings to observe **plant and animal diversity** for second and third graders, **salmon education** for fourth graders, and **fully outdoors after school programming** for grades K-2. Starting in fall 2022, the Coalition plans to offer the full suite of Connections programming to nearly all students!

“As we continue to remove layers of mitigation that have been in effect during the pandemic we know the importance of engaging hands-on real world learning experiences for our students. This partnership allows us to expose our students to some of those valuable learning opportunities outside the classroom. We appreciate the continued partnership within our community as a model of what common vision and partnerships can bring to our students.

— Dr. Christopher Granger, Blaine School District Superintendent



444
STUDENTS SERVED

122
OUTDOOR
INSTRUCTION HOURS

2,100
NATURE HOURS

Alignment with BSD Strategic Plan 2020-2023:

The Connections program aligns with BSD's commitment to partnering with parents, students, and community to support a strong foundation for life-long learners and Strategic Plan Goal 2: Social Emotional Learning and Student Safety (Engage in leading learning where every individual is committed to a safe environment where students can grow and learn in a multitiered system of support).

Alignment with Priority Supports for Students Identified by District:

- Building Relationships
- Early Learning (K-4 literacy)
- Extracurricular Activities
- Multi-tiered System of Supports
- SEL and Mental Health Supports

STUDENT IMPACTS

“The whole experience is very good. The classroom activities are easy to teach and engaging for students. Students really take ownership of their environment after our trip.”

—4th Grade Teacher,
Blaine Elementary



“So helpful to see students outside, and the interactions they had with peers and nature. They were very interested in learning about the plants—they were focused and asking high leveled questions. Mixing FUN with learning!”

—3rd Grade Teacher,
Blaine Elementary

“It's a great way to get kids comfortable outside, learning about nature, and have experiences with trusted mentors and peers.”

—After-school Program parent,
Kendall Elementary

OUTDOOR LEARNING GRANTS

The Connections program is a continuation of a similar collaborative effort during the 2020-2021 school year in Bellingham, Blaine, and Mount Baker School Districts to support students and districts during remote learning that grew out of the **Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education (WCEE)**. Inspired by those efforts, Representative Alicia Rule worked to secure two years of funding to continue programs in Mount Baker and Blaine School Districts as well as championed House Bill 2078: *Outdoor Learning Grants*, to expand outdoor education statewide.

The opening text of *Outdoor Learning Grants* reads, “The [Washington State] legislature finds that time outdoors helps children thrive physically, emotionally, and academically, yet over the past few generations, childhood has moved indoors. On average, today's kids spend up to 44 hours per week in front of a screen, and less than 10 minutes a day doing activities outdoors. From stress reduction to improved focus and engagement, and better academic performance, outdoor-based learning helps kids thrive.”

“As a social worker and mom, I've never seen children's mental health this bad. But we know that crises can also be opportunities if we move forward with hope. It's time to recover together by getting kids out from behind screens and into nature.

— Representative Alicia Rule

The Connections program aims to complement and build upon the recent passage of *Outdoor Learning Grants*, which directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to create a program that will award grants to support schools in offering outdoor learning, requires that OSPI give priority to schools that have been underserved in science education, and encourages the program to work with education stakeholders to develop principles for outdoor education.

LEARN MORE

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Wild Whatcom