



WASHINGTON STATE
Department of
Children, Youth, and Families

Outdoor Preschool Pilot Participating Programs

Program Name and Location	Location	Pilot Cohort
ACORNS NW	Olympia, WA	Implementer
Fiddleheads	Seattle, WA	Observer
Into the Forest	Spokane, WA	Observer
Madrona Nature School	Bellingham, WA	Implementer
Nurture in Nature Preschool	Tacoma, WA	Observer
Owl's Hollow: Olympic Nature Experience	Sequim, WA	Implementer
Play Frontier	Carson, WA	Implementer
Polliwog Preschool: Mercer Slough EEC	Bellevue, WA	Observer
Roots & Sky Nature School	Seattle, WA	Observer
Sapling & Cedars: Squaxin Island Child Development Center	Shelton, WA	Implementer
Tiny Trees	Various Locations in King County, WA	Implementer (3 sites) and Observer (6 sites)
Washington Outdoor School	Roslyn and Ellensburg, WA	Observer (2 sites)

Outdoor Preschool Pilot Participant Testimonials¹

ACORNS NW (various locations in Olympia, WA area). A Cooperative Outdoor Revolutionary Nature School Northwest (ACORNS NW) is a non-profit program currently in the process of becoming a 501(c)(3). We serve a total of 33 children (including eight children with special needs), ages 2 to 5 years old, and 30 families. We are a nature- and earth-based experiential learning program. We seek to help nurture and restore connection to the natural world through exploration, play, observation, and community. It is our hope that prioritizing a connection to nature and building a relationship in the ways we learn, grow, teach, share, and live, that we will create more inclusive and sustainable futures for all beings. ACORNS NW Forest School was co-founded in November 2015 as a homeschool enrichment program by two queer women, Heather McKenna and Kendra Obom. Our hope and vision is to create accessible nature connection programming for the Olympia and Thurston County community. For the past two years, Ms. McKenna and Obom have acted as the directors on a mostly volunteer basis with the hope of providing affordable programming and meaningful employment within their community. In 2016, Melissa Fassbender and Allan Davis helped found the preschool program, which has grown into ACORNS NW most active program. The ACORNS NW community seeks cooperative and justice-based approaches to both social and environmental issues, and continues to grow its capacity to deliver alternative education and nature-based community for all ages.

Cedarsong Nature School (Vashon Island, WA). (DCYF note: Cedarsong's Forest Kindergarten will close after the 2018-2019 school year due to the passing of Director Erin Kenny. Included is the participant testimonial from last year's report). This program is a 501(c)(3), non-profit entity and currently serves 25 families with enrolled children from two to six years old. An additional ten families are currently on the waitlist, mostly for two year old children. In addition, each class accommodates up to two children diagnosed with high functioning autism, ADHD, or SPD. Cedarsong Forest Kindergarten is 100% outdoors for four hours no matter what the weather, there is no indoor space on the Cedarsong campus. The most distinguishing feature is that we are committed to unstructured flow learning for the entire time the children are with us. There is no schedule, no agenda, no pre-set activities, and no direct teacher instruction. We use inquiry-based teaching to draw out children's problem-solving. We emphasize compassion, respect, and mindfulness towards each other and towards the natural world. We are also a physical therapy and sensory integration program because these kids thrive with the lack of transitions at our school. With licensing, we could serve families that need all-day coverage and families who need financial assistance. We already provide a number of scholarships through our fundraising, but the need keeps increasing and we are having a hard time keeping up with requests.

Fiddleheads Forest School (University of Washington, Seattle, WA). Fiddleheads Forest School was established at the Washington Park Arboretum, a public park in the city of Seattle, in 2013. Fiddleheads was the first entirely outdoor preschool in Seattle and one of the first urban outdoor preschools in the country. In 2017, Fiddleheads served over 80 families of children ages 3-5 in our morning, afternoon, and summer school programs, and has 176 families on our annual waitlist with children ages 3-5. Flexibility is a cornerstone of the Fiddleheads philosophy. Our program is as responsive as the environment in which we operate. Teachers take into account a variety of factors including the weather, the wildlife, and the children themselves when determining the direction of the day. On any given day at Fiddleheads, students spend the morning exploring and engaging with their environment in a multitude

of ways that is unique to our specific space. At Fiddleheads we believe strongly in empowering students to guide their own learning process, and work to help each of them develop the tools to do just that through use of a curriculum that expressly teaches self-regulation. We have found that the forest grove classroom is uniquely suited to helping children develop these skills through exposure to gradual, contextual change. Fiddleheads pioneered the outdoor preschool approach in Seattle and continue to lead the field both regionally and nationally. We established the Washington Nature Preschool Association to help support the field regionally, and work with the Natural Start Alliance to develop national standards of best practice. Our seasonal approach arises out of the unique relationship between, children, families, and the environment, and emphasizes the development of self-regulation and natural science skills. Becoming licensed would help set a standard of practice in the field and allow us to reach a greater diversity of families in and around the Seattle area.

Into the Forest Preschool (Spokane, WA). We are a licensed childcare facility that offers outdoor learning. We serve 15 children and 15 families. We opened our facility in hopes to create a program that blends the Reggio Approach and Waldorf Theory; focusing on a nature-infused learning environment with real life experiences. We also bring nature inside for learning. We believe children learn best through experiences of touching, moving, listening, and observing—when they have control over the direction of their learning. A child’s self-confidence and self-esteem are built when they can explore and make their own decisions while being supported by peers and teachers. Our classrooms resemble homelike environments and use simple and natural materials, which allow children to immerse themselves in imaginative and creative play and learning. We also offer a safe place for children to explore and problem-solve in outdoor adventures. This strengthens the connection between children and the natural world. Everyday this outdoor program offers many opportunities for unplanned learning, such as watching birds build a nest or a hummingbird drink nectar from a flower. We want to build a solid foundation of healthy living habits that children can take with them as they grow and learn. Right now, we are unable to have or do a lot of the things we want to do, things that we know benefit a child’s learning tremendously. We are participating in the pilot project to see if we can help change the standards in this area to allow such natural learning.

The Madrona Nature School (Bellingham, WA). The Madrona School is a licensed childcare located in Bellingham, WA founded 10 years ago by Laurie Saling. We are a Reggio Inspired program with an educational philosophy rooted in weaving inquiry-based learning with social-emotional development. We currently serve 30 families with approximately 15 on our wait list ages 2.5 - 5 years of age. Our younger students are based out of our building site with outdoor learning in our garden classroom and neighborhood park. Our Nature-Based PreK program, ages 4 -5, is outdoors with a “rain or shine” approach. The PreK programs spends its first 3 -4 hours in our neighboring city park, which has a variety of natural habitats to explore. This program provides students with large amounts of time to play, explore and experience natural ecosystems and materials. This outdoor engagement teaches ecological literacy and instills stewardship of our land. We have a stewardship agreement with the Bellingham Parks Department in which The Madrona School is responsible for a section of Squalicum Park to weed invasive plants in a habitat restoration area. The nature design principles of David Sobel guide our curriculum creation. In the afternoons the students return to the building site for literacy and math workshops to extend our learning of the natural world in connection with the Early Learning Guidelines. We have chosen to participate in the DCYF pilot program to have the ability to increase our capacity to serve more families in our community with a Nature-Based full day program.

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Nurture in Nature Preschool (Tacoma, WA). Nurture in Nature Preschool is based at the Tacoma Nature Center, which is a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma. Our mission is to provide a high-quality early childhood environment that meets preschoolers' needs, while inspiring them to love nature. We serve 64 children ages 3-6 years old during the school year in five different sections (from 64 families) and 12 pre-K students in summer school (from 12 families). With over 70 acres of natural area, several dedicated indoor and outdoor school spaces, and outstanding teachers and staff, this hands-on learning program allows children to learn and grow at their own pace. We encourage their endless curiosity and plant the seeds to help them become lifelong learners. Our emergent child-inspired curriculum often follows the changing seasons. Although traditional academic skills and opportunities are part of our school, they are definitely not the focus. Our philosophy is that preschoolers grow and learn how to be part of a community through play, discovery, and learning. When their brain is ready, they will naturally gravitate towards more academic pursuits.

Olympic Nature Experience (Sequim, WA). Olympic Nature Experience is a non-profit located in Sequim, Washington surrounded by the beautiful Olympic Peninsula. Our preschool programs run four days a week and serve 32 children, ages 3-6 years old, from 32 families. Several children have special needs such as speech impairment, giftedness or possible spectrum disorders. Our organization also runs programs a family play group, summer camps, after school programs, and homeschool enrichment classes for children from birth to age 12 years old. The backbone of our school's philosophy has developed from Wilderness Awareness School's nature connection model, which uses children's passions, emergent curriculum, and flexible activities to educate, inspire, and empower children. To ensure our children are meeting Early Learning standards and are Kindergarten Ready, we have created an in house Waldorf-inspired curriculum and an educational framework that incorporates the five standard Head Start domains. We added our own sixth domain, called Earth Wisdom which incorporates ideas of connection to place, critical thinking, community building and personal empowerment. By connecting children with their local environment, they are learning the age appropriate math, literacy, and cognition skills but with an everyday context that gives the world around them greater relevance.

Becoming licensed would benefit our programs by ensuring our staff has the support and training to meet the national and statewide standards that will set our students up for success no matter what their continued learning path takes. Additionally, allowing our programs to offer before- or after-care, or additional hours when appropriate and safe, could open our programs up to more families who are interested in our model. If we could access state funding for low income families, we could also decrease the heavy burden our organization has undertaken to ensure we have enough tuition assistance to meet the needs of our community.

PLAY FRONTIER (Carson, WA). Play Frontier aims to remove the barriers of cost and availability by forming a nonprofit childcare center (Frontier Center for Child Development) and an adult education hub (Frontier Center for Teaching & Learning). These two parts make us whole, because children are only as strong as the community that loves and cares for them. We are conserving childhood in Skamania County through acceptance, education, and empowerment of children and families. In practice, this looks like children being agents of their own learning through observing, questioning, and discovery, alongside supportive adults who do the same.

Play Frontier is located at the southernmost border of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in the old historic Wind River Nursery. Never heard of it? Neither had we until we stumbled upon a forest service

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ghost town, complete with miles of trails, a 9 acre arboretum and a training center where every park ranger in the nation was originally trained at the program's inception. Add to that the giant fields from the original Douglas fir nursery (that supplied the nation's trees for reforestation!) and you have the makings of a magical place where our deep bonds with nature and our local history come alive! Conservation itself was born here after Gifford Pinchot saw what logging was doing to our precious ecosystem. We offer full-time care for 32 children 0-5 years old, and believe that environmental stewardship starts at birth. With this in mind, we venture out to our neighboring trails daily.

A partnership with Community Enrichment of Klickitat and Skamania Counties (CEKC) connects us to local resources and allows us to operate as a 501(c)(3). We believe that all children deserve a quality, loving environment that connects them to nature, regardless of income. Community partners are paramount to our mission, as we seek to grow a community that values children and our earth - from the ground up.

Polliwog Preschool: Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center (Bellevue, WA). Polliwog Preschool is a play- and nature-based preschool at the Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center in Bellevue. Now entering its eighth year, the program is a collaboration between the Pacific Science Center in Seattle and the City of Bellevue. At Polliwog, we believe that the natural world is an ideal catalyst for discovery and an amazing medium to lay a foundation for the love of learning. While we have indoor classroom space, we spend 50-90% of our day exploring the outdoors in the 320-acre wetland park. Polliwog Preschool has three part-time classes, with 12 children age 3-5 years old in each class. We currently serve 36 total families. Last year, we were only able to offer enrollment space to about 40% of families who applied.

Polliwog Preschool uses the natural world as the guiding theme to frame our core curriculum areas of science, art, music, math, language and literacy. The program is play-based and student-driven with a combination of activity choices, discovery explorations, and specific activities that relate to each week's theme. With a 320 acre wetland as our classroom, "Polliwogs" have the opportunity to hike through the forest, dip for creatures in a pond, investigate the flow of a stream, wander through meadows, and bounce on a bog. While we're not sure whether licensure is right for our program, we've enjoyed the advisory group discussions about best practices, and look forward to another year of participation in the pilot program.

Saplings & Cedars: Squaxin Island Child Development Center (Shelton, WA). Squaxin Island Child Development Center is a for-profit entity owned by the non-profit Squaxin Island Tribe. The center expanded their license capacity to begin offering Saplings & Cedars. We began Saplings & Cedars as our initial program for the Outdoor Preschool Pilot on October 1, 2018 with 12 children, ages 4-5. The program has been so popular that we will be adding an afternoon session in November or December. Saplings & Cedars is unique to the pilot project as it is part of an already licensed child care center through DCYF. The updated license capacity to accommodate the outdoor class is 130. The center is located on property owned by the Squaxin Island Tribe. It is located near a natural forested area with two fresh water streams with a "culturally modified tree" as the focal point of the building. The site is surrounded by tall maple, fir and cedar trees and offers ground cover similar to a rain forest. Salmon return to the two streams each year as a part of their natural life cycle.

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Our program celebrates and honors what “Mother-Earth” gives us. We have our own garden beds where the children actively engage in the planting and harvesting of crops that are used in our food service program. We partner closely with the Squaxin Island Community Garden staff and Community Development staff to participate in recycling and composting. Fruit trees were donated to establish our own orchard. The pumpkins we grow are used each October for National Pumpkin Day and apples are harvested to make cider. One of the highlights of our program is the annual Salmon Ceremony. The children are actively engaged in drumming, dancing and singing about the arrival of the first salmon. Tribal elders and leaders come and share stories about the life of the salmon and the children honor the salmon by respectfully returning part of the salmon back to the water to let other salmon know they are welcome here.

Although we use Creative Curriculum to guide our curriculum, we still practice emergent studies/curriculum to support the needs and interests of the children. There is a blend of group and individual exploration and play. Each day opens with a group safety meeting and concludes with a group hike into the forested area, before debriefing and returning to the classrooms for the afternoon, as most children are here for the entire day. It is the intent of this program to inspire exploration and making connections to the natural world.

Tiny Trees Preschool (several locations throughout King County, WA). Tiny Trees is a 501(c)(3) non-profit based in Seattle with classroom sites throughout King County. 265 children, ages 3-5 years old, from 265 families attend daily classes. Tiny Trees uses the High Scope curriculum, which incorporates evidence-based practices to provide the highest quality learning environment for our children. High Scope is a preferred curriculum of Head Start and Seattle Preschool Program facilities. Tiny Trees also makes preschool affordable by eliminating the cost of building, renovating, and maintaining a child care facility. We break down the schoolhouse walls and take the classroom outdoors. This means that instead of spending a huge amount on bricks and mortar, we spend money on what matters: hiring and supporting great teachers. Tiny Trees is a scale up of an innovative, proven concept. Started in Europe, outdoor preschools have shown to be healthier, more affordable and able to reach great academic outcomes. Tiny Trees is modeled after outdoor preschools in Norway, Germany and Denmark, three countries where the weather can get really cold. Tiny Trees also helps kids enter kindergarten ready to thrive. We help children learn to read, succeed at math and explore the wild where they receive both a world class science education and a gleefully muddy childhood: one full of play, exploration, and wonder in the great outdoors. Full day classes are a must for working families. Becoming a licensed child care provider would allow Tiny Trees the ability to offer students and families a higher quality environment, improved health and safety, and greater ability for low income families to work.

Washington Outdoor School (Roslyn and Ellensburg, WA). The Washington Outdoor School is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, based in Roslyn, Washington, that serves children from 2.5 to 6 years old in morning programs and children in grades K-5 in after school programs. Our programs currently serve approximately 55 children from 50 families in Kittitas County during fall, winter, and spring seasons, and we maintain a low student-to-teacher ratio (we also offer 7 weeks of Summer camp serving Preschool through Elementary age students). Our all-outdoor settings include forested trails—some more maintained than others (we come across fallen trees at times)—sandstone outcroppings, and seasonal creeks and streams in Roslyn. In Ellensburg, Helen McCabe State Park has a large pond and is skirted by a rushing creek, which makes its way to the Yakima River through a canyon. The landscape changes quite dramatically through the seasons. Access is easy along parts of the pond trail in late fall through

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winter, but the difficulty increases in the spring when grasses grow taller than the children. Two Crack Oak trees in the park are favorite places for the children to climb, and we spend a lot of time in and around them throughout the year. It is not unusual for us to walk more than a mile a day in both locations and sometimes much more than that in Roslyn. Drop off and pick up occur in local parks, Helen McCabe State Park (Ellensburg) and Centennial Park (Roslyn).

Our mission is to cultivate a child's sense of wonder and foster a sense of stewardship through immersion in the natural world. We believe that interacting with nature encourages a sense and knowledge of place, awakens curiosity and creates healthy minds and bodies. Our work is based on the core values of strong communities, equal access to outdoor adventures, and stewardship of our natural world. Our approach to education is child-interest led with an emphasis on experiencing each day in the moment—noticing changes and building on previous experiences. The natural world provides our curriculum for the day. We are about exploration, play, building positive relationships with each other and the world around us, and experiencing what the natural world has to offer, which cultivates an attitude of joy and wonder within each child. We infuse experiences with relevant books, stories, songs, and activities. These experiences can include journal writing, crafts, and, in Roslyn, planting and tending to garden spaces. Being licensed by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families would validate our type of program and communicate to families that programs like the Washington Outdoor School provide viable preschool options for kindergarten readiness. We seek to provide equal access to outdoor adventures, but many families in Kittitas County struggle to afford early learning programs for their children. As a DCYF- licensed program, families could use state subsidies toward tuition, which would allow our program to better serve our economically diverse community.

ⁱ Statements were provided by the pilot program participants and reflect the opinion of those independent entities, and not necessarily the opinion of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families.