Place-Based Education in Action

Sunnyside Environmental School · 2025–2026 By the Numbers

Service learning, environmental education and place-based learning at Sunnyside are cornerstones of our commitment to community building, stewardship, and advocacy for environmental and social justice. They are woven into every student's week, from the school garden to the State Capitol. Our curriculum deeply integrates service learning with storyline methodology, field study and outdoor learning. Since its founding as the Environmental Middle School in 1994, Sunnyside has spent 32 years fostering deeply rooted connections between students and the places they live.

2025–26 AT A GLANCE

24,810 hours

spent by middle schoolers learning in the living classrooms of Portland's rivers, mountains, forests, and oceans as part of our standards-aligned, place-based environmental education curriculum, which involves weekly field studies around the region

7,000+ hours

growing food in the school garden: every student, 1 hour a week for the entire year, across nine grade levels

1,285 hours

of service learning by middle schoolers: pulling invasive ivy, cleaning rivers and beaches, marking storm drains and farming with partners

54

community partners

How it works

Place-based learning and service are woven into all aspects of Sunnyside's curriculum.

- **Themed years:** Each student completes three of four standards-aligned themed years (Ocean, River, Forest, Mountain) in mixed-grade (6–8) classrooms.
- **An integrated K–8 community:** Weekly buddy time with first, second and third graders; rotating campus stewardship duties; a weekly 60-minute garden class; and service projects across the city and region.
- **A deep partner network:** 54 community organizations host our weekly field studies and service projects.

Being a leader and tending our community

- **2,880 hours** mentoring 188 first-, second- and third-grade buddies, plus **about 900 hours** helping run the cafeteria, recess, school events and two stage productions
- **1,800 sack lunches** with handwritten cards for about 500 neighbors facing food insecurity (with Beacon Village), plus blankets and supplies gathered for local shelters and organizations by **135 students**
- **260 hours** of arts and culture: calacas for Día de los Muertos with Ofrenda Oregon, wreaths with Mujeres Luchadores Progresistas, and public art (orca fins, a QSA mural, 20 painted salmon)

Using their voice for change

- **$10,000 P-CEF climate grant** written and won by students, who then helped build the outdoor classroom with City Repair and PSU
- **90 hours** writing testimony and lobbying at the State Capitol for HB 4134, a wildlife funding bill, with Environment Oregon
- Presented their work to P-CEF funders and the PPS superintendent; **37 students** joined a youth-led climate strike



Students present the outdoor classroom they helped build with the $10,000 PCEF climate grant they wrote and won.

Lifetime impact of the program

For more than three decades, Sunnyside students have carried what they learn into the places where decisions get made.

- **Shaping local and state policy.** Students have testified before Portland City Council in support of the city's ban on new fossil fuel infrastructure, before the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission on endangered status for orcas, and to state lawmakers on the Elliott State Forest and HB 4134. A second-grade campaign, "Loam not Foam," pushed to replace polystyrene lunch trays and was part of the movement toward Oregon's school polystyrene ban.
- **Taking their case to state leaders.** An 8th-grade cohort worked with local scientists and advocates to produce a video on the proposed Jordan Cove LNG terminal and delivered it to Governor Kate Brown, the State Treasurer and senators. Students also attended Our Children's Trust hearings in Eugene and Portland in support of youth climate plaintiffs.
- **Teaching beyond our walls.** Middle schoolers wrote a curriculum on local wildlife and brought it to dozens of PPS elementary schools. Sunnyside's 2013 Energy Teach-In, which brought experts from across the region to help students weigh the world's energy choices, drew coverage from the Portland Tribune and the Zinn Education Project.

Inspiring the next generation of leaders

> SES instilled environmental values in me. It's the main reason I became an environmental lawyer.
>
> — Aidan F., alumnus of Sunnyside Environmental School

> SES has been a major influence in my life and is what instilled environmental values in me. It's the main reason I became an environmental lawyer.
>
> — Aidan F., SES alumnus

> Sunnyside inspired me to do climate activism during high school and college. I now work as an energy efficiency engineer, because Sunnyside made me want to center my career on the climate.
>
> — Solomon D., SES alumnus

About the data: figures cover the 2025–26 school year (192 students, grades 6–8) and come from teacher reports and school records. Some participation counts are estimated. Full data: Service by the Numbers 2026 workbook.