

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
KEEN AWARDED \$276,631
FROM SUMMER EXPERIENCES AND ENRICHMENT FOR KIDS (SEEK)**

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In the fall of 2021, the Kittitas Environmental Education Network (KEEN) collaborated with the City of Ellensburg to apply for Summer Experiences and Enrichment for Kids (SEEK) funding from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). In early 2022, the team was notified of a \$276,631 grant in support of KEEN's program, Windy City Park Rangers. The grant also provides for scholarships for kids to attend KEEN's summer camp, Pond to Pines.

KEEN's Windy City Park Rangers is designed as an outdoor day-camp program held in 4 parks around the City of Ellensburg from June 20-August 26. The camp runs from 9am – 3pm Monday to Friday, with weekend programming for families.

WCPR is open for pre-registration on Monday the 18th at www.ycic.org/parkrangers and is offered on a sliding-scale donation basis ranging from \$0/week to \$150/week. The program is open to all youth in our community from kindergarten to 8th grade. Sibling groups are encouraged to attend.

Carlyn Saunders, KEEN's Environmental Education Director said that, "we're not sure if this grant will be around next year, so we're asking that those families who can afford it, help out and pay what they can. But, for those families who need child care and need some help with finances, the program is very low cost or totally free."

Over the past 3 years, KEEN has provided a small Science in the Parks program that grew from reaching 50 children to over 500 during the summer of 2021. In summer 2021, the program was offered for 2-hours per day, 4-days a week, in rotating park locations. The demand became overwhelming for KEEN's limited staff and funding, with up to 35 children attending at each location each day. The popularity of this program is evidence of a critical need in our community and why KEEN wrote the grant.

"We are excited to put this grant to work," said Jill Scheffer KEEN's President, "Summer should be about playing outside and having fun with friends. KEEN incorporates STEAM learning into that fun; our goal is to help kids avoid the dreaded 'summer slide'."

The summer slide is when kids lose some of what they learned during the school year and start the next year in a deficit. This 'summer slide' is greatest for children from low-income families and can, over time, lead to wide academic disparities between them and children from higher-income families. Students from low-income families are most likely to attend a summer program, but their unmet demand for summer programs is also highest.

KEEN's activities are tiered to national educational standards and incorporate best practices of environmental education. And even with all those big concepts, kids will find they're having a lot of fun!

WCPR is a nature immersion program with daily STEAM activities mixed in with recreational activities and just plain summer fun. Open to kindergarten through 8th grade students, WCPR provides 'day-camp'

child care experiences in locations that are easy to access via walking or public transportation. Using SEEK grant funding, WCPR will provide critical child care to our community.

“Place-based learning and outdoor free-play are at the heart of WCPR programming,” said Adrienne Pinsoneault, KEEN’s SEEK Program Director. “Nature walks, observation journals, and creative play in the different parks are incorporated into every day. WCPR focuses on what makes each park within the City of Ellensburg unique. For example, Irene Rinehart Park is bounded by the Yakima River and has extensive walking trails and two swimming lakes. At that park, we bring in extensive water play with kayaks and stand-up paddle boards during the hot days of summer. In contrast, Kiwanis Park has a restored portion of Mercer Creek, playgrounds, and sports fields. At that park, we focus on art and science projects, and free play on the playgrounds.”

KEEN’s Windy City Park Rangers is just one of several KEEN Nature School programs and has key goals:

- Our place-based program promotes healthy physical development in a stimulating learning environment.
- We promote building social skills and connection while developing healthy social skills and peer-group relations to encourage improved communication and problem-solving skills.
- We are learner-led. Allowing children to take the lead fosters their fascination with the world around them and free play opportunities inspire their creativity.
- We encourage children to take appropriate risks which provide real world examples to learn risk assessment and self-regulation.
- We nurture connections to the natural world to enhance understanding of our role as environmental stewards in our local community. WCPR also includes an aspect of service learning every day ranging from garbage cleanup to habitat improvement projects.

KEEN was established in 2000 and our mission is to cultivate an active awareness and understanding of the endangered shrub-steppe, provide nature-based education for all ages, and strengthen commitment to environmental stewardship. Our main project is to establish the Yakima Canyon Interpretive Center (YCIC) at Helen McCabe Memorial Park near Ellensburg, WA.

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Additional Background Information

We know that school-age children spend 80% of their waking hours outside of school. Given area statistics, we estimate that between 30-40% of our community’s children are home alone after the school day ends and during the 9 weeks of summer every year. Summer programs support social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, reduce risky behaviors, promote physical health, and provide a safe and supportive environment for children and youth.

The expansion of KEEN’s Windy City Park Rangers will allow consistent and repetitive attendance. Regular participation can lead to improved social and emotional competencies, including prosocial behavior, intrinsic motivation, better concentration efforts, and higher sense of self-worth. So called social-emotional learning is an integral part of human development that advances educational equity and excellence.

Our authentic learning environments and experiences feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. This allows staff to address various forms of inequity and empower young people to contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities. Poverty reduction, economic mobility, and reduced reliance on public assistance have also been found to be benefits of social and emotional learning. These “soft skills” are essential for workforce development and lead to more youth being hired and successful in their jobs. Development of personal and social skills in afterschool settings that implement SAFE (sequences, active, focused, and explicit) features also lead to higher academic achievement, positive feelings and attitudes toward school.

Participating in summer programs leads to increased adult supervision which makes youth feel safer and reduces instances of being left unsupervised with peers out of school. It also means that younger children are supervised by older siblings less often. Adult supervision that is based on developmental relationships promotes positive youth development as it not only promotes personal safety and decreases risky behaviors such as smoking or drug abuse, but also creates an environment where young people learn better and are able to thrive. Working families and businesses also benefit from summer programs that ensure that youth have a safe place to go while parents or guardians are at work.

It is important to note that access to high-quality afterschool and summer programs is not always equitable. There can be significant disparities based on income and education, transportation, cultural and developmental appropriateness of programming, and neighborhood safety, among other factors. Given local statistics from our partners at FISH and APOYO, KEEN estimates that 50-65% of our school-aged children cannot afford to attend high quality afterschool or summer programs.

KEEN relies on community partnerships. Key to the success of the WCPR program is partnerships with the two local food banks, FISH and APOYO, the local school district, and other non-profit partners. Though KEEN works with a lot of community partners, the only staff interacting with children and daily programming will be supervised directly by KEEN staff.

- APOYO and FISH: KEEN works with these two local food banks to advertise the availability of KEEN’s Windy City Park Rangers and to reach out to communities in need.
- Central Washington University: KEEN works with several programs at the university, including programs that directly serve migrant and minority students, to recruit Spanish-speaking college student mentors for Nature School programming.
- Ellensburg School District and Pacific Education Institute (PEI): PEI has been working with the Ellensburg School District to increase outdoor time over the past few years, and the district has embraced the goal of getting kids outdoors. KEEN’s afterschool programming takes place in the natural area behind Mt. Stuart school.
- Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group (Mid-Columbia Fisheries): Mid-Columbia Fisheries provides staff time for program planning, Spanish translation for written materials, seasonal interns, and some program supplies.

The day camps will run 9-3 every week day, with supplemental Saturday & Sunday afternoon family recreational programming. Each child will receive 6 hours of outdoor educational programming per day, 30 hours per week, and up to 270 hours per summer with a total potential of 1,700,000 hours of supervised youth programming in our community. No other program in our area even comes close to

that amount of in-person contact for youth over the summer. The Saturday & Sunday programming will target whole family participation, and will include guided nature walks, recreational activities, ADA-accessible naturalist programs, and volunteer stewardship opportunities.

The “Summer Experiences & Enrichment for Kids” (SEEK) program is for summer outdoor programs serving school-aged youth (K-12 – age 4-21). The purpose of the SEEK Fund is to increase access to quality, outdoor summer programming for youth and communities who have historically been underserved and who have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The **Washington Recreation & Park Association (WRPA)**, in collaboration with the **Association of Washington Cities (AWC)**, announced the program in the fall with a \$10 million funding program. This program, administered by AWC and made possible by funds provided to the **Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)**, will enable local parks and recreation agencies throughout the state to expand summer outdoor education programs offered to school-aged kids.