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Interview with Environmental Education of New Mexico (EENM) about the importance of outdoor learning for the state's children

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1. How would creating outdoor classrooms support the work of environmental justice and/or social justice champions?

Actually, the answer to this question is quite simple. People support, protect and defend most strongly what they know and love. With a deep love and understanding of our natural world people will also understand the threat that climate change presents. But unequal Access is a key factor in this.

If you have memories from childhood of the smells, sounds, and feelings of the wonder and complexity of our natural world, you will treasure that world as an adult. If you learned about your culture, stories and elders in an outdoor setting of comfort and safety, you will hold those teachings and settings dear. If your scientific curiosity has been sparked by hearing a certain bird call, or viewing soil microbes under a microscope, or observing the shape of a leaf, you will hold that memory after you have your degree in biology. And if, to this very day, you long to take a break from your desk to step outside to enjoy a breath of air and calming relief, to take a short stroll and allow a bird or a scent or the motion of walking restore you, you may have enjoyed that same pleasure as a child.

But if your outdoor environment is not nurturing or safe, or is damaged beyond recognition by pollution, industrial damage or neglect, as happens in many communities of low wealth or color, you may not have been able to experience the wonder, pleasure and joy that outdoor learning can offer. That every child must have full access and opportunity unhampered by poverty or injustice, and environmental degradation is a core 350NM value.

2. How would having outdoor learning coordinators at schools advance your org's mission?

As a retired public school elementary teacher myself, I have experienced both the isolation that a teacher can feel in the classroom, as well as the strength and vitality true collaboration can bring.



Nancy showcasing the benefits of electric vehicles at a parade with the 350NM Electric Vehicle Car Club during one of her many volunteer jobs with the group

Having a coordinator to bring together teachers of different subject areas into coordination and common purpose is a joy. And having worked in both middle and high schools on climate change education, I am convinced that the need for cross subject cooperation is fundamental.

Without coordination, we are at risk of teaching only the science without the public policy and self expression, or only the policy without it being informed by science. Both are essential to develop climate aware residents who can appreciate and protect New Mexico's vital waters and resources.

3. How will micro-credentialing for outdoor educators support the educational opportunities that your organizations offer to our state?

I received my MA in Early Childhood Education from UNM, and began teaching in the first Kindergarten at Cortez Elementary in Albuquerque, and ended my teaching in first grade in Northfield, IL. Unfortunately, along the way I had to teach myself as well as win over staff and administration to the benefits of outdoor education. From the playground "bug club" I created to engage the students who needed a different way of relating to peers on the playground, to the mini gardens we started for first graders to the seasonal walks to a nearby stream that were turned into poems, I truly wish that I had not had to 'make it up as I went along.'

Even more importantly, I would like to see outdoor education receive the validation, respect and intellectual acknowledgment it deserves. Specialized credentialing signals that this is a proven, documented and recognized component of a quality education. A scientific, cultural and experiential outdoor education is a building block of climate education, which is a major emphasis of 350NM.