

The Best Day Ever

Siskiyou COE's Route to Parks Initiative Expands Access and Opportunity

For students in Siskiyou County, a school day might mean stepping into a classroom. Or it might mean standing beside a waterfall, exploring a watershed, or visiting a state park for the first time.

Through the [California Route to Parks grant](#), Siskiyou County Office of Education (COE) is making those moments possible by bringing hands-on science learning into the outdoors. The effort is reaching small and rural schools across the county, many of which face real barriers to offering field-based experiences.

Stacia Anderson, outdoor science education specialist at Siskiyou COE, began the work by going directly to the community. “I went to board meetings, PTA meetings, staff meetings, and student meetings. I basically met with anyone who would talk to me and asked how I could get their input,” she explained.

What emerged was a clear priority around access and equity. In a region where distance, funding, and transportation all create challenges, the program was intentionally designed to reach students who might otherwise miss out. “We targeted the students who would most likely have the least access. A lot of these schools don't have transportation or the funding to do these kinds of trips,” Anderson said.

Siskiyou COE handles logistics centrally and provides educators to lead each experience, rather than asking schools to do extra planning. “We're providing an educator to lead the trip, so schools really just have to say yes, coordinate chaperones, and turn in their travel reimbursement,” Anderson shared. That simplicity has made participation easier for even the smallest districts. Anderson said, “It feels like a really positive net gain for them.”

Behind that simplicity is a great deal of coordination. This year, the program includes 28 field trips. Each trip is scheduled, staffed, and supported by the county office team. Agreements, transportation, and reimbursements are handled behind the scenes, so schools can focus on students. The result is a model that reduces administrative burden and increases access to hands-on learning.

For Deputy Superintendent Barry Barnhart, the program reflects the unique and essential role county offices play in supporting small districts. “Many of our districts are tiny and can't have a science specialist of their own. For us to provide science support across the county really meets that need,” he said. Siskiyou COE employs a team of educators who deliver science instruction across multiple districts.

The grant also creates an important entry point for districts that may not typically partner with the county office. “It gives districts a sense of what we're about and what we offer, especially for

those who haven't worked with us before," Barnhart explained. In that way, the program not only serves students in the moment but also builds relationships that can strengthen instructional programs over time.

Out in the field, the impact is immediate. Students are not just learning about science concepts; they are experiencing them in real environments, alongside their peers and community. Families are part of that experience as well. "It's been really sweet to see parents, grandparents, and families come out and chaperone. It's a positive way for them to engage with students and with nature," Anderson said.

Partnerships with local tribes, park staff, and community organizations add even more depth. Students learn directly from people who work on and care for the land, gaining insight into environmental stewardship. In some cases, those connections are personal, with students seeing family members of their own or community members represented in the work.

For many students, the experience is entirely new. "Some of the students would not have gone to Castle Crags state park if it weren't for this opportunity," Anderson said. Even the teachers are discovering new places alongside their students. "There were teachers saying they had never been there and really wanted to go," Anderson added. That shared sense of discovery creates a powerful learning environment that extends beyond the classroom.

The response from students has been overwhelmingly positive. "I got lots of 'this was the best day ever,' and teachers sending thank-you notes and pictures," Anderson shared. Those moments of excitement and engagement point to something deeper. When students are given meaningful opportunities, they connect with learning in lasting ways and carry those experiences well beyond a single day.

That level of impact is not accidental. It is the result of intentional investment in people, time, and vision. Barnhart reflected on his own experience as a former Superintendent/Principal. He has previously served in Siskiyou County at a school district for 6 years. "There's no way I, my staff, or any of us could have spent time writing grants. Small school districts do not have that capacity that I know of, and that I've experienced," he said. Barnhart emphasized that without county offices stepping in, many of these opportunities would simply not exist. "If county offices don't have that capacity, then who is going to go after these grants? You end up with only larger districts being able to access them."

He added that even a small investment of time can make a big difference. "It's only because we were able to carve out a few days of grant writing time that we were able to do this," Barnhart said. That limited capacity has opened doors for opportunities that directly benefit students across the county.

The work also reflects Siskiyou COE's broader 5 organizational values. "We talk about being innovative, professional, responsive, supportive, and knowledgeable," Barnhart shared.

“Innovation stands out here. This grant allowed us to expand what we offer students and find new ways to bring resources into our districts.”

Anderson sees that alignment as well and in the day-to-day work. “We’re providing high-quality direct services, and it really feels like we are delivering on that commitment to support districts in a meaningful way,” she said.

The foundation for this approach was built over time, shaped by leadership and a long-term vision for science education in Siskiyou County. Barnhart pointed to County Superintendent of Siskiyou COE Allan Carver’s role in that work. “Carver saw early on how powerful science could be in engaging students and getting them excited about coming to school,” Barnhart explained. “That idea grew into a system where the county office employs teachers who can bring hands-on science and outdoor learning directly to students.” Over the past decade, that vision has helped create a consistent, countywide approach to science education that continues to expand.

Now, the program is on track to reach all districts in Siskiyou County.

At its core, this effort shows what is possible when barriers are removed and access is prioritized. For students in Siskiyou County, it is more than a field trip. It means connecting to their environment and their community, and for many of them, it truly is their best day ever.