



My name is Elana Mintz, and I'm the founder and executive director of Urban Adventure Squad, a DC-based nonprofit education organization. For ten years, in collaboration with schools and nonprofit partners, we have relentlessly sought funding and support to bring equitable, curriculum-aligned, neighborhood-based outdoor learning programs to public schools and communities across DC.

A compelling and growing body of evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of outdoor learning, including improved outcomes in mental and physical health, academic achievement, and attendance rates.

But there is no financial support for it within DCPS. We've normalized keeping children inside all or most of the day--including in windowless classrooms with failing HVAC systems and non-working lights.

In 2018, we were awarded our first grant from the DC Department of Energy and Environment to implement a hyperlocal watershed education curriculum in partnership with a Ward 5 public charter school.

This was life-changing. It was \$20,000, and real support for our efforts to integrate outdoor learning into the curriculum. The project focused on a hidden body of water, about a mile from the school, which feeds into the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River.

Since 2018, through competitive grants and funding, we've brought more than a half million dollars into DC public and public charter schools. Of that, about \$350,000 has come from DOEE funding.

We have never received funding from either DC Public Schools or the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, despite the great goals of both of these agencies, which include educating the whole child and helping students become environmentally literate.

DOEE, then, is the primary funding source for environmental education in our public schools. But there is not enough money available to support a truly equitable approach to environmental education for our students, even when we focus almost entirely on Title 1 schools.

In 2021, when overnight environmental education programs were paused due to the pandemic, DOEE launched Nature Near Schools, a pilot grant based on our model of activating the areas on and near school grounds as outdoor classrooms. For two years, Urban Adventure Squad, Casey Trees, Living Classrooms, and Anacostia Watershed Society used funding that was formerly allocated to overnight programming.

In 2023, when overnight programming was re-starting, DOEE announced that the next round of funding would be awarded to one grantee to provide both Nature Near Schools and overnight programming to 2000 DC public and public charter school students.

We are nonprofit partners, so we always find a way. We are tremendously thankful that Casey Trees led a collaborative coalition of providers that include NatureBridge and the Alice Ferguson Foundation.

Today, we're reaching many more students but seeing them less often. There is simply not enough funding to allow each of our organizations to bring sustained environmental education into our public school system. Many more schools than we can serve request outdoor learning experiences.

We can do better by our students and our teachers by increasing this funding to support the goals of DC's Environmental Literacy Plan.

Thank you so much.