

Ripple Effects of the Lower Columbia Nature Network



Image Source: VPS Ogden Elementary School, Jane Tesner Kleiner

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Appreciations

The successful completion of this Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) report relied on the contributions of several key individuals. Foremost, thank you to the community leaders who shared their experience and insights during the REM session.

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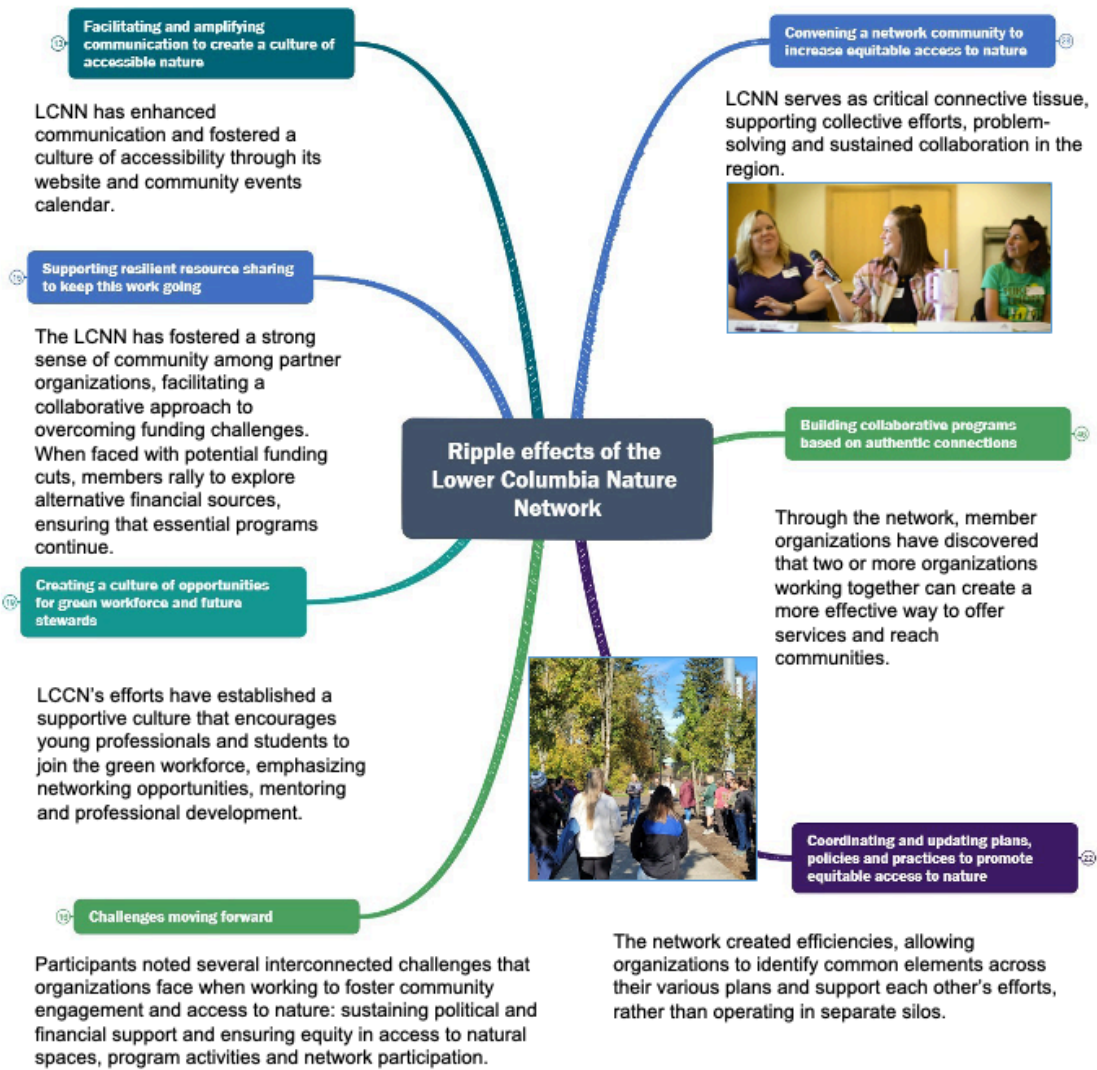
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Ripple Effects Mapping summary graphic

Ripple Effects of the Lower Columbia Nature Network

In 2021, the Lower Columbia Nature Network (LCNN) joined the Cities Connecting Children to Nature green schoolyards technical assistance cohort. The technical assistance and seed funding supported the development of the Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan, convening a network of organizations aimed at bringing more equitable access to nature for school communities. In September 2025, LCCN participated in a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation process to document and understand the impacts of the initiative. The following themes emerged from the process:



"One of the key successes of the Lower Columbia Nature Network has been the ability of partners to identify key plans for their organizations and learn where other organizations overlap, compliment, diverge, etc."

Background

The Lower Columbia Nature Network (LCNN) is a regional coalition of partners in the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area dedicated to equitable and welcoming access to nature for everyone.¹ Working in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex, LCNN elevates the organizational partners in the network. It provides key information to the public, giving them more tools to connect with nature.

In 2021, LCNN joined the Cities Connecting Children to Nature green schoolyards technical assistance cohort.² The network received two years of strategic planning, technical support and seed funding to develop the Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan,³ which aims to expand equitable access to nature for school communities across Southwest Washington. Bringing together schools, Vancouver city representatives, Clark County and various partners throughout the region, LCNN sought opportunities and mutually aligned goals to work toward healthy communities, utilizing green schoolyards as a unifying approach.

Green schoolyards, also known as living schoolyards, are nature-filled outdoor spaces that provide students, teachers, parents and community members with places to play, learn, explore and grow.⁴ Designed with and for the school community, these shared outdoor spaces can also be enjoyed by kids, families and neighbors during out-of-school time. Green schoolyards can be designed to meet community needs. They can include outdoor classrooms, native gardens, stormwater capture, traditional playground equipment, nature play areas, gardens, trails, trees, water features and more.

The LCNN partnership's shared vision is to "make nature welcoming to all by working toward equitable and welcoming access to nature for everyone and being a leader in the Southwest Washington region for collaboration and network support." Their mission is to "elevate the partners in the network and provide key information to the public to give them more tools to connect with nature, including partner-to-partner connections and support; network to community information; and

¹ Lower Columbia Nature Network <http://www.lowercolumbianaturenetwork.org>

² Pallais, A. (2021). Cities take the lead in transforming schoolyards with nature to help kids thrive. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/cities-take-the-lead-in-transforming-schoolyards-with-nature-to-help-kids-thrive/>

³ Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan (2023) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6115b3f3ead544249d81a5f6/t/654049690aeae82706e02afe/1698711918584/SW+WA+Green+Schoolyards+Action+Plan+DRAFT+v10.30.23.pdf>

⁴ Children and Nature Network. Green Schoolyards Toolkit <https://www.childrenandnature.org/schools/greening-schoolyards>

collaborative efforts to expand impact. A detailed list of partners is provided in Appendix A.

In addition to green schoolyards, the Lower Columbia Nature Network focused on out-of-school time, youth leadership development, green career exposure and early childhood nature connections.

LCNN partners have been working to increase access to nature through infrastructure projects, programs, and partnerships by:

- **Installing green schoolyards, nature play and inclusive spaces at scale:** Southwest Washington school districts, including Vancouver Public Schools, Evergreen Public Schools, Camas School District, Battle Ground Public Schools, Longview School District and Kelso School District, funded outdoor learning opportunities through district capital improvement bonds, state grants, community partnerships, grassroots efforts and donations for green schoolyard infrastructure. More than 75 schools now include a green schoolyard component, extending access to nature and greenspace to more than 36,000 students.
- **Activating outdoor learning through training and partnerships:** LCNN partners collaborate to support student learning and educator training, and to provide curriculum resources and school-based environmental education programs that activate green schoolyards. Through collaborative efforts, LCNN partners have reached over 200 educators.
- **Advancing nature access through park and library systems:** In addition to school grounds, the City of Vancouver Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services and Clark County Parks and Nature have added nature play, including four inclusive playgrounds in the city since 2022. Fort Vancouver Regional Libraries provide Check Out Washington Backpacks for families at all 18 locations across 4,200 square miles, hosts storytime in nature settings at libraries and community events, and provides StoryWalks.[®]
- **Aligning city, school and county comprehensive plans:** Aligning existing plans with the Green Schoolyards Action Plan works to create city-wide greenspace access for children. The City of Vancouver's Climate Action Plan,⁵ Urban Tree Canopy Plan,⁶ and Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Comprehensive Plan align with a 10-minute walk to parks and greenspaces

⁵ City of Vancouver, WA (2022) Climate Action Framework.

<https://www.cityofvancouver.us/city-managers-office/climate-action/>

⁶ City of Vancouver, WA. Urban Forestry Work Plan 2025-2026.

<https://www.cityofvancouver.us/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Work-Plan-25-26.pdf>

supporting city and county's climate action frameworks, and are supported by the public utility company.

In 2023, the CCCN initiative evolved into a larger national network called Nature Everywhere Communities, supported by a partnership among the Children & Nature Network, the National League of Cities, and KABOOM! In 2025, the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative invited the Lower Columbia Nature Network to participate in a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation to document and understand the impacts of systems-change efforts aimed at creating more equitable access to nature for children everywhere they live, learn and play. The LCNN was one of five communities across the U.S. to participate in this evaluation process

About the Ripple Effects Mapping process

Ripple Effects Mapping is an evaluation method that engages a range of program participants to retrospectively and visually map the chain of effects resulting from a program, complex collaboration or initiative. The REM process combines elements of Appreciative Inquiry,⁷ mind mapping, group interviewing and qualitative data analysis.⁸



REM workshop, Sept. 2025
Image Source: Lower Columbia Nature Network

On September 25, 2025, 28 people from LCNN partner organizations came together for a Ripple Effects Mapping session at the City of Vancouver's Water Resources

⁷ Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based organizational development process, increasingly used in evaluation, that involves the art and practice of asking questions that build on the successful, effective and energizing experiences of those involved with a program. For an overview see https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/appreciative_inquiry

⁸ More information about the Ripple Effects Mapping process can be found at <https://extension.umn.edu/community-development/ripple-effect-mapping>

Education Center. The session was facilitated by Dr. Erin Allaman, Director of Learning & Evaluation and Co-Director of Research for the Children & Nature Network, and Dr. Scott Chazdon, a consultant with expertise in Ripple Effects Mapping.

At the beginning of the session, participants interviewed each other in groups of three using the following Appreciative Inquiry questions:

- Share a story about one or more highlights or successes that emerged from the Lower Columbia Nature Network and what you think were the key elements of success.
- Tell me about new or deepened connections with others (individuals, communities, organizations, educational institutions, government, philanthropic) you made as a result of your involvement with the Lower Columbia Nature Network? What did these connections lead to?
- Share a story about changes in policies, practices, programming, funding, or natural or built spaces that emerged from the Lower Columbia Nature Network and what you think were the key elements of success.
- What unexpected things did you observe in the community that contributed to the success of the Lower Columbia Nature Network?

After the interviews, a representative from each group reported the three most important stories they had heard during the interview process. These reflections were captured using a mind-mapping program, which participants could view on a screen. Participants also wrote their interview responses on a notetaking sheet so that additional reflections could be added to the map after the session.



REM participants share highlights from group conversations
Image Source: David Ives

During a lunch break, the co-facilitators brainstormed a list of core impact themes that fit the stories reported by participants. After the break, the facilitators led a discussion of these core impact themes, editing the theme titles and sometimes moving stories that better fit one theme more than another. During this group reflection, participants also shared additional examples and stories to add to the ripple effects map. Finally, participants discussed some of

the challenges that occur in meeting organizational and collaboration goals. These challenges were added as a core theme on the mind map.

After the session, all the information from the interview sheets was added to the draft map. An additional four people who were unable to attend the September 25 session responded to the Appreciative Inquiry questions in an online survey. Once all data was added, the map was reviewed and edited by several LCNN members.⁹

The core impact themes emerging from the interview process were:

- Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature
- Building collaborative programs based on authentic connections
- Coordinating and updating plans, policies and practices to promote equitable access to nature
- Creating a culture of opportunities for a green workforce and future stewards
- Supporting resilient resource sharing to keep this work going
- Facilitating and amplifying communication to create a culture of accessible nature
- Challenges moving forward

The remainder of this report is organized around these seven themes with narrative examples from the ripple effects map. Images of each section of the ripple effects map are available in Appendix B.

Findings organized by theme

Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature

In a popular handbook on the power of social networks, Plastrik and Taylor (2006)¹⁰ wrote that “in practical terms, networks can boost efficiency and effectiveness, attract supporters and resources, and help increase focus, sustainability, and capabilities. They transform one’s capacity to act. (p. 23)”

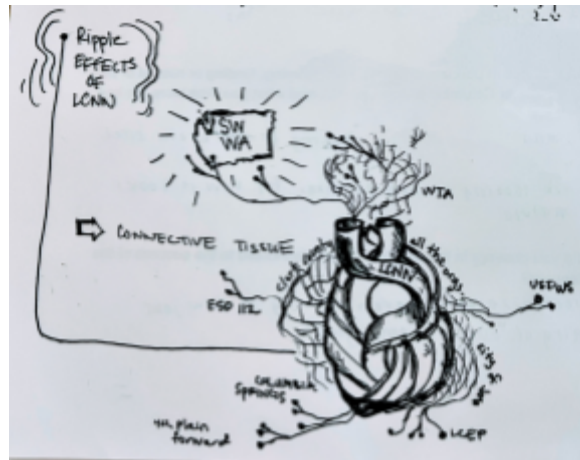
LCNN has established connections across agencies, nonprofits and community groups, greatly enhancing partner organizations' capacity to act. Network connections have led to joint projects, funding opportunities and outreach activities that engage families, students and underserved communities. The network has also provided opportunities for professional growth, inspiration and joy in the work,

⁹ Ives, David. Video of the LCNN REM process. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsD960t8swA>

¹⁰ Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2006). Net gains: A handbook for network builders seeking social change. Innovation Network for Communities. Retrieved from https://soaz.info/network_handbook.pdf

especially for educators and program leaders. Overall, the network has served as a critical connective tissue, supporting collective efforts, problem-solving and sustained collaboration in the region.

The network has created an environment conducive to networking and relationship-building, unleashing a wealth of energy for nature-based learning and experience. This superpower of connections, as described by one participant, combined with thoughtful and purposeful introductions, led to a deeper understanding of what the work is and how we can accomplish it together.



Graphic by Mesha Wood
Image Source: LCNN

Several participants in the REM session emphasized that the face-to-face connections and networking made possible by LCNN went beyond simple introductions to foster deeper relationships, collaboration and a sense of community among organizations. As noted by one group member, “coming together face-to-face and understanding who the different organizations are in the region makes a big difference. The behind-the-scenes is the connective tissue; the LCNN is really important and it's understated, but it is critical for making the work happen.” Another participant shared that members get programming ideas from other organizations and make personal connections, allowing them to put a name to a face.

“I personally have met so many colleagues around our region that I may have not had the chance to meet without the Network’s partnership meetings. We reach out to other organizations, visit their sites, share goals and programs, learn about staffing, as well as challenges and opportunities. These opportunities to meet each other, learn more, build relationships, share resources and support the collective work has been invaluable.”

As participants in the REM session considered the importance of their networking activities, several members highlighted that this was not just a transactional form of networking; relationships built through LCNN have created a network and community. A participant shared that, “it’s beyond networking because we are building deeper relationships. As people

leave one organization and join another, they can still remain part of their network in their new organization. Building a community has been a major outcome of LCNN.” For example, a group member shared that a highlight for her was going to Plas Newydd Farm in Ridgefield: “We did poetry and art while on the porch of this farm and talked about how we can connect people to nature using art as the medium. It was a reminder of being in community.”

Through its networking activities, LCNN has created purposeful connections among people and organizations that would not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet. These opportunities then led to the identification of shared purpose and collaboration. A group member noted in particular how connections she has made through LCNN have helped align program goals and reach underserved communities. Workshops like one about green schoolyards allowed members to connect with people and communities they wouldn't otherwise have access to. A participant noted that "LCNN has emphasized the importance of collaboration, not competition, by bringing multiple organizations together to support one another's goals."

Several participants shared that the organizational connections through LCNN made it much easier to access volunteers to deliver their programs. A group member shared that she connected one of her group members with the Fort Vancouver Regional Libraries volunteer coordinator to help find additional volunteers for her organization. Another group member noted that the Washington Trails Association has been instrumental in recruiting volunteers to help maintain and restore key trails in the refuge system in the greater Vancouver area. With this volunteer workforce, they also created an ADA-accessible bench and replicated it along the trail system to support all trail users.

A final insight regarding this theme was the importance of LCNN's leadership and coordination. As noted by one group member, "steady leadership makes relationship building easier and creates space to maintain relationships outside of meetings." A participant noted that "there's a thoughtful behind-the-scenes thing that happens when Jane¹¹ makes a connection."

Building collaborative programs based on authentic connections

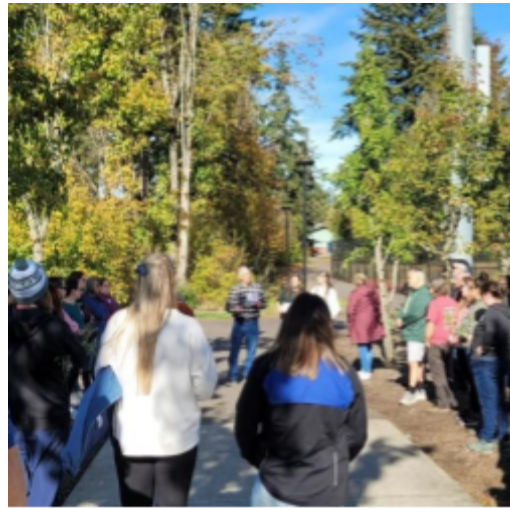
Another robust theme from the REM session concerned the broad range of collaborative programs that have been developed or enhanced through the networking described above. Participants were insistent that the theme title include the word "authentic" to describe the manner in which network members have developed connections in response to the lived experiences of community members. In describing the Taking Learning Outside teaching training sessions, a group member shared how the collaboration to develop the program was based on hearing from people who were participating in the program. "There were many different partners who shared their expertise and developed that programming in formats that worked for teachers."

A core activity of LCNN in recent years was the development of the Green Schoolyards Action Plan. Participants shared that the planning, design, and installation of green schoolyards have been highly collaborative across participating

¹¹ Jane Tesner-Kleiner, LCNN Project Manager

schools and districts, and the results have been impressive. Vancouver Public Schools (VPS) built six replacement or new elementary schoolyards, including multiple outdoor learning classrooms, inclusive playgrounds, nature play and learning gardens, and numerous trees and native plants, and implemented green stormwater techniques.

Evergreen Public Schools built six replacement elementary green schoolyards, one middle school green schoolyard, and one high school project that included multiple outdoor learning areas, nature play, learning gardens, loop paths, and more. Several other school districts have also added outdoor learning areas and gardens, including those in Camas, Battle Ground, Longview, and Kelso. Several schools now have dedicated school garden coordinators, including the Longview and Kelso schools, which partner with the Lower Columbia School Gardens, and the Hough Elementary school garden team. All of these projects have built a variety of examples for other schools to follow. A participant shared that, following the collaborative model established by LCNN, many more schools are using community partners and parent-teacher organizations to help with community events and fundraising for more green schoolyard features.



Take Learning Outside Educator training workshop 2024 2025
Image Source: LCNN

The Fort Vancouver Regional Libraries system has further developed its Check Out Washington backpack program and made StoryWalks® available to partner sites. “Fort Vancouver Regional Libraries collaboration with LCNN led them to move more library programs outside of their buildings to get people out to their neighborhood parks and trails.” The backpack program includes a pass for free vehicle access to

“We have several locations with artists that connect people through diverse hands-on art workshops, our nature-smart library programming, hands-on stewardship, career development for young adults, etc. There are so many opportunities for creative and unique partnerships, events and programmed activities to reach a wide audience across our communities.”

Washington State Parks, Department of Natural Resources lands, and Department of Fish and Wildlife areas, as well as binoculars, field guides and maps. The StoryWalks® are an innovative way to get people of all ages moving, reading, and talking together outside as they explore a children’s picture book. Pages from a

book are transformed into signs that are placed along a trail or walking path, inviting

children and families to follow the path and immerse themselves in the story as they walk. A library staff member shared that the National Wildlife Refuge sites are perfect to add StoryWalks® along the trails to engage visitors. A participant shared that there is public demand for more StoryWalk® programming and other community partners have reached out to borrow the storyboards for their own use. “We’ve also been contacted by other libraries about how we design and use our storyboards.”

Through the network, member organizations have discovered that two or more organizations working together can more effectively create opportunities to offer services and reach communities. Organizations that take kids on field trips identify sites that are more accessible to all students and help teachers understand which sites are better suited to students with varying needs. These practices even led to school policy changes, including the development of an accessibility assessment for field trips to better serve individuals with unique needs.

“The Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership has many engagement programs, but their most successful is using their Big Canoe program. As the Lower Columbia Nature Network works to introduce partners to each other in meetings, we also use the various partner sites for meeting locations, as well as programs. For one partner meeting, we met at a local park for the meeting and then took one of the big canoes for a trip on Lake River and Vancouver Lake. This allowed partners to engage with each other and get a hands-on look at programming.”

Within the LCNN, multiple organizations have built partnerships and collaborations. These strong collaborations have enhanced each organization's efforts and increased the availability and accessibility of greenspaces for youth.

Coordinating and updating plans, policies and practices to promote equitable access to nature

Relationship building and collaboration through LCNN have led to a variety of systems changes. LCNN and its member organizations have created or updated a wide range of policies, plans and practices that promote equitable access to nature and ensure that this work will continue into the future. Organizations such as the City of Vancouver and Clark County have aligned their climate action initiatives, including comprehensive plans that prioritize access to parks and greenspaces. The Green Schoolyards Plan has emerged as a pivotal project that reflects this collaboration, integrating climate action goals with educational pursuits. This comprehensive approach has allowed multiple stakeholders to identify overlaps in their plans, enhancing the overall effectiveness of their environmental initiatives.

The network has created efficiencies, enabling organizations to identify common elements across their plans and support each other’s efforts rather than operating in silos. For example, the City of Vancouver has a Climate Action Plan that ties in with

the Urban Tree Canopy Plan and the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Department's Comprehensive Plan, which calls for a 10-minute walk to parks and greenspaces. These plans further correlate with the Clark County Climate Action Plan and Fourth Plain Forward's climate action work.

"A highlight was the Art in the Park event led by Fourth Plain Forward, bringing partners together in the neighborhood park. It's a culturally diverse neighborhood and we have Spanish and Chuukese events and food. It's a cultural, art, and nature gathering."

While the City of Vancouver has a climate action framework, there are many potential partnerships to make a difference across the community. A group member shared that LCNN has encouraged more than checking the boxes; it is a more systemic approach. The Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan identified areas of overlap with the county's Climate Action Plan. As shared by a group member, Clark Public Utilities has been intentional about adding pollinator habitats across many of its properties. LCNN helped coordinate useful contacts and connections that have made the program successful, including student plantings. Pollinator garden efforts have also educated community members to appreciate gardens that look different than what they may be culturally used to, and it has been helpful to have a network of educators to collaborate with on student curriculum for the gardens.

Local schools that recently implemented capital bond projects aligned with the Washington Sustainable Schools Protocol, including outdoor learning spaces and gardens. This work laid the foundation to significantly expand the number of green schoolyards throughout the region. This document includes planning and policy documents to connect with regional and local plans and partners, detailed descriptions and examples of a wide variety of green schoolyard features and a resource section.

Clark County Public Health has begun collaborating with other county departments, including Parks and Nature and Public Works, to incorporate a public health equity lens into cross-programmatic development. This has led to brainstorming for increased access for all users, including children and youth with special healthcare needs.

LCNN hosted a panel discussion and several joint workshops on accessibility with phenomenal regional and local experts. As a result, many organizations are updating Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plans, providing more concise information about accessible sites and events. Participants noted that they have become much more aware of how best to serve everyone in their community.

Creating a culture of opportunities for a green workforce and future stewards

LCNN's efforts have established a supportive culture that encourages young professionals and students to join the green workforce, emphasizing networking opportunities, mentoring and professional development.

LCNN has provided young professionals with opportunities to network and contribute to the effort. A participant shared that AmeriCorps youth have attended meetings and that this is a great opportunity for them. One particular AmeriCorps volunteer was really excited to gain access and then conducted informational interviews with members of this group.

Community-driven projects such as ProjectVOICE and the Clark County Green Schools Student Summits have engaged youth in important discussions about climate and environmental issues.

These initiatives allow for collaborative efforts in green career development, encompassing teacher training, classroom coordination, and hands-on projects such as campus planting and stewardship, ultimately aiming for a sustainable impact in both education and local ecosystems.

"ProjectVOICE was a beautiful success sourced by young community members. A key element was finding a speaker that directly relates to them. Future proof of a way of engaging with community."

ProjectVOICE was a culmination of several months of work with local teachers, students and community partners in central Vancouver. The program was designed to increase student engagement, voice and agency by connecting students to

real-world problems affecting the local community and collaborating with local organizations that are working on solutions. A participant shared that a highlight of her experience with LCNN was when Monique Gray Smith, author of Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults, spoke about nature journaling as part of ProjectVOICE.



LCNN partners learn to teach nature journaling with John Muir Laws
Image Source: LCNN

Clark County Public Health's Clark County Green Schools program hosts Student Summits twice each year. These events provide an opportunity for the county's climate action planning project and other LCNN partner

organizations to support student activities, fostering important engagement with youth.

A pilot program for youth climate leadership was initiated by individuals who met through LCNN, who had experience in building successful youth programs and navigating logistics and challenges. A group member shared the importance of having teachers and school staff in the room who could identify gaps to make the program more successful.

Professional development workshops offered through LCNN have benefited both new and more experienced network members. Monthly meeting topics, including grant writing, volunteer coordination, collaborating with tribal partners and focusing on accessibility, have enabled network members to share their experiences and learn from one another.



Partners participate in a field workshop about accessible sites
Image Source: LCNN

One particular experiential learning opportunity was an accessibility site study workshop that enabled partners to learn about something not central to their work but that enhances the programs they offer. Participants learned to do site assessments to become better prepared to serve the variety of students with accessibility needs at the different sites. The accessibility site study workshop also helped the City of Vancouver and Clark County Parks and Nature to update their Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plans for their park systems, ensuring proactive improvements to connect all to nearby nature.

Supporting resilient resource sharing to keep this work going

The LCNN has fostered a strong sense of community among partner organizations, facilitating a collaborative approach to overcoming funding challenges. A participant shared that “we feel like a community of support, and that materializes in many ways. One is around funding challenges and how many organizations feel supported by this group as funding challenges present themselves.” When faced with potential funding cuts, as The Canopy Collective experienced, members rally to explore alternative funding sources to ensure that essential programs continue.

This network not only provides financial assistance but also enhances programming opportunities by leveraging the diverse expertise and broad range of activities represented within the community. “One of the key successes of the Lower Columbia Nature Network has been the ability for partners to identify key plans for their organizations and learn where other organizations overlap, compliment and diverge.” By sharing knowledge and resources, participants can identify gaps, assess needs and explore collaborative solutions to various challenges. A group member noted that “there are so many resources and so much knowledge in the room – so much sharing of items and ideas. We've been able to come to the meetings and say ‘I've heard about that’ and ‘Let's talk more.’ This goes back to the networking community, which follows through on ideas.”

The partnerships forged within the LCNN provide a safety net for members, allowing them to draw on shared resources and collective knowledge when developing programs that can adapt to fluctuating funding

“When organizations started losing funding the LCNN provided a lot of support for partner organizations. Even with more limited funding, there were wins with the support provides from this group. Key element: not letting community members struggle through challenges alone.”

environments. This collaborative spirit is vital, especially for organizations reliant on grants, like the Clark Conservation District, which finds that working together not only strengthens their programming but also fosters greater community resilience. A representative from the Conservation District reported that they are 100% grant-funded, so programming grows or contracts due to changes in grant funding, but collaboration helps. “We wanted to do more urban outreach, so we are collaborating with Fourth Plain Forward and others to accomplish this. Everything happened due to the connections [we made] at LCNN.”

“Many times two or more organizations working together can create something that is more competitive as a project to be funded.”

Finally, the network's emphasis on collaboration rather than competition has enabled member organizations to submit joint funding requests that are more favorably viewed by funders. By

pooling their resources and expertise, these organizations enhance their competitiveness in securing projects and grants, especially given competition from larger urban centers. A participant summarized this idea: “In thinking about funding requests, we are competing with larger cities, so the collaborative effort that happens here in Southwest Washington is unique.”

Facilitating and amplifying communication to create a culture of accessible nature

LCNN has enhanced communication and fostered a culture of accessibility through its website and community events calendar. The calendar compiles activities from various organizations, making it easier for community members, like teachers, to plan field trips and find nature events for children. The calendar has been well-received, with community members reporting it as a valuable resource. For example, one event posted on the calendar attracted 200 participants through effective community engagement. A participant commented that “we have a great website that is a hub for our network. It keeps us connected and it’s also our forward face to the community.”

“The calendar has been amazing - a resource built together. Community members talk about using it when looking for nature-based events for their kids. Not everyone in the community has all these connections. This is a one-stop shop for nature-based activities.”

Another group member added that the accessibility page is helpful, easy to share with others, and useful as a tool for the greater community. LCNN has hosted several workshops with partners to review websites and communications and how they let the public know where access to nature is accessible. A recent addition to the calendar is specific information about event accessibility, so prospective attendees can consider it as they decide whether to attend. Leaning on local and regional experts to continue these conversations is just one of the ways LCNN supports partner organizations and community outreach.

Challenges moving forward

Toward the end of the Ripple Effects Mapping session, the facilitators asked participants to describe some of the challenges they have faced in their participation in LCNN. Participants noted several interconnected challenges that organizations

“We have exciting ideas and we don’t have the authority or power to make these ideas happen. We are always trying to convince those with power to make things happen.”

face when working to foster community engagement and equitable access to nature.

One broad theme was about sustaining political and

financial support for this work. For many policymakers in education and local government, access to nature is still considered non-essential. This led a group member to ask, “Who needs to be influenced? Families? Local government? How

can we be innovative around political will?” Another group member added that navigating in a world of competing demands is challenging: “Everything else seems to take priority over nature-based approaches.”

A participant made the point that vulnerable communities (like immigrant families) view libraries as part of government, so when political changes affect these communities, libraries see decreased engagement from them. In this way, the larger political situation makes it even more difficult to build trust with underserved groups.

Several group members expressed concerns about financial sustainability. A participant noted that dollars from a stable funder, like the U.S. government, are no longer guaranteed. Another added that living through the ebb and flow of funding is a challenge.

Organizational challenges surfaced in the balance of partnerships and priorities within LCNN. A group member commented that “the internal work of partners around the table is generative, but it gets hard to prioritize the partnership work over the work I'm expected to do in my organization.” A participant expressed a concern that LCNN has been too focused on internal goals of the network and needs to shift energy to market network events for the public, especially through the calendar.

Concerns about equitable access arose in several forms. Regarding the goal of inspiring young people to pursue nature-based education work, a participant commented that, even if they are passionate about the work, the pay isn't comparable to what they might be able to earn in other fields. Climate hazards, such as extreme heat, may draw more people to natural spaces with tree canopies, especially those who may not have air conditioning in their homes. However, barriers like parking fees may exacerbate inequalities in access to these natural spaces when people need them most. Finally, a participant noted that, “looking around the room, it's mostly white and mostly female. How do we diversify? We're all committed to diversity, but it isn't represented in the group.”

Summary and key takeaways

This Ripple Effects Mapping evaluation documented the broad range of personal, organizational and network impacts of the Lower Columbia Nature Network in the Southwest Washington region. With support from the Cities Connecting Children with Nature initiative in 2023, LCNN convened a broad range of public and nonprofit sector organizations to create the Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan. This advanced green schoolyards and a range of activities focused on out-of-school time, youth leadership development, green career exposure and early childhood nature connections.

On September 25, 2025, a group of 28 people from LCNN member organizations came together for a Ripple Effects Mapping session at the City of Vancouver Water Resources Education Center. The session was facilitated by Erin Allaman, Director of Learning & Evaluation and Co-Director of Research for the Children & Nature Network, and Scott Chazdon, a consultant with expertise in Ripple Effects Mapping.

At the beginning of the session, participants interviewed each other in groups of three using Appreciative Inquiry questions focused on the network's impacts. Six core impact themes emerged from the interview process. In addition, toward the end of the REM session, participants discussed some of the challenges they have faced in their work as part of LCNN. These challenges were added as a seventh theme. The paragraphs below summarize the key findings related to these themes.

Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature: LCNN has established connections across various agencies, nonprofits and community groups, resulting in collaborative projects, funding opportunities and outreach activities that engage families and underserved communities. The network also provides opportunities for professional growth, inspiration and joy in the work, especially for educators and program leaders. Overall, the network serves as a critical connective tissue, supporting collective efforts, problem-solving and sustained collaboration in the region.

Building collaborative programs based on authentic connections: The most robust theme from the REM session was the broad range of collaborative programs developed or enhanced through the LCNN. Participants were insistent that the theme title include the word “authentic” to describe the manner in which network members have developed connections in response to the lived experiences of community members.

“There's a layer of privilege that creates a separation with people in communities. There is a need for deep listening. It is important to understand the nature connections that already exist in communities.”

Through the network, member organizations have discovered that two or more organizations working together can create a more effective way to create opportunities to offer services and reach communities.

Coordinating and updating plans, policies and practices to promote equitable access to nature: Relationship building and collaboration through LCNN have led to a variety of systems changes. LCNN and its member organizations have created or updated a wide range of policies, plans and practices that promote equitable access

to nature and ensure that this work will continue into the future. Organizations such as the City of Vancouver and Clark County have aligned their climate action initiatives, including comprehensive plans that prioritize access to parks and greenspace. The Green Schoolyards Plan has emerged as a pivotal project that reflects this collaboration, integrating climate action goals with educational pursuits. This comprehensive approach has allowed multiple stakeholders to identify overlaps in their plans, enhancing the overall effectiveness of their environmental initiatives.

Creating a culture of opportunities for a green workforce and future stewards:

LCNN's efforts have established a supportive culture that encourages young professionals and students to join the green workforce, emphasizing networking opportunities, mentoring and professional development. Community-driven projects such as ProjectVOICE and the Clark County Green Schools Student Summits have engaged youth in important discussions about climate and environmental issues. These initiatives enable collaborative efforts in green career development, encompassing teacher training, classroom coordination and hands-on projects such as campus planting and stewardship, ultimately aiming for a sustainable impact in both education and local ecosystems.

Supporting resilient resource sharing to keep this work going: The LCNN has fostered a strong sense of community among partner organizations, facilitating a collaborative approach to overcoming funding challenges. When faced with potential funding cuts, members rally to explore alternative financial sources, ensuring that essential programs continue. This network not only provides financial assistance but also enhances programming opportunities by leveraging the diverse expertise and broad range of activities represented within the community. By sharing knowledge and resources, participants can identify gaps, assess needs and explore collaborative solutions to various challenges.

Facilitating and amplifying communication to create a culture of accessible nature: LCNN has enhanced communication and fostered a culture of accessibility through its website and community events calendar. The calendar compiles activities from various organizations, making it easier for community members, like teachers, to plan field trips and find nature events for children. The website and calendar have kept network organizations connected with each other as well as serving as LCNN's forward face to the community.

Challenges moving forward: Toward the end of the Executive Committee Ripple Effects Mapping session, the facilitators asked participants to describe some of the challenges they have faced in their participation in LCNN. Participants noted several interconnected challenges that organizations face when working to foster community

engagement and access to nature. One broad theme was about sustaining political and financial support for this work. Several participants described organizational challenges arising within LCNN, including an ongoing challenge promoting equitable access to natural spaces and activities, as well as increasing network participation.

In summary, the Lower Columbia Nature Network (LCNN) has cultivated a strong community that enhances equitable access to nature by fostering authentic relationships among diverse organizations, individuals and agencies in the region. Through face-to-face interactions and networking, members have developed deeper connections that transcend organizational boundaries, allowing for collaboration on shared projects, funding opportunities and program development. This collaborative spirit has led to successful initiatives such as green schoolyards, accessibility assessments and community engagement programs that bring nature to underserved communities. However, the network also faces challenges such as funding disparities, maintaining representation and addressing systemic barriers to access to nature. Effectively reaching underserved populations to address equity concerns will require ongoing innovation and, potentially, new strategies to include BIPOC community representatives in the network.

Reflections from Lower Columbia Nature Network Program Manager

The Lower Columbia Nature Network was developed as a project of The Intertwine Alliance, a broader metro-regional non-profit. Several partners came together to minimize conflicting large events, like Earth Day and Go Outdoors Day. We quickly realized that many Southwest Washington opportunities are unique to our county, cities, and non-profits that serve this area. So we started a volunteer-led Clark County Nature Network to meet quarterly to share ideas, learn from each other, train together and seek common goals.

As funding shifted, large community events became more scarce. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and our regional partners recognized the need to collaborate, not compete. We knew we needed to collaborate on those opportunities that overlap our work. We have different funding, audiences, volunteers, resources and sites for our work, all unique to Southwest Washington. Through a partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Urban Refuge Program, the team at the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex saw an opportunity to bridge partners and reach broader audiences. The LCNN was born as a project to bring more partners together in late 2019.

The National Wildlife Refuge system is vast and spread out across our communities and region in our metro area. Realizing that not all community members may venture out to the refuges, there is a need to broaden the education about what our natural resources are and how they benefit the community. Also, with limited funds in the area schools, students may not be able to take day trips to refuges or outdoor schools.

Thus, the opportunity to collaborate and take all of our unique programs and sites into our communities. Partner agencies can spend more time in classrooms and neighborhood parks to introduce our diverse communities to the endless ways to connect to nature. We want to ensure that all community members feel safe, welcome and free to explore nearby nature and the backcountry. The inventory of partners doing this work is a never-ending cycle of building relationships, navigating changing staff and learning how best to reach our diverse communities.

Moving forward, LCNN is grateful to lean into and be supported by the data, research, and expertise of the Children & Nature Network, the National League of Cities, and KABOOM!. The Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan and the REM workshop have allowed our team to dive in, meet each other, learn what expertise we all bring to the table and connect to align our resources.

Like most communities, addressing unstable funding sources and effectively communicating our needs, benefits and opportunities are ever-evolving conversations. The Ripple Effects Mapping allows us to streamline where we have been, what we are currently doing and focus on goals for moving this work forward. No one organization can carry the weight of giving every student a chance to visit nature, but together we can identify gaps in connecting with people, craft a set of solutions, create a portfolio of opportunities, and build a collection of engagements that reflect our community's needs and interests. This will be an evolving process for sure, but the benefits of nature connections are too important not to celebrate every success and build broader opportunities for all. Nature offers opportunities for everyone. Safe access to nature out everyone's back door. Working together to make an impact.

Jane Tesner Kleiner, LCNN Program Manager

Appendix A – Lower Columbia Nature Network partner information

The **Lower Columbia Nature Network** connects our community to nature and public lands by fostering partnerships across Southwest Washington. Nature isn't just what can be found far away; it is right outside your front door.

<http://www.lowercolumbianaturenetwork.org>



Image Source: LCNN Overview, 2025

The **Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan** is a living document to advance nature connections at and with schools throughout our region. This work is supported by a Technical Assistance Grant from the Children & Nature Network and the National League of Cities, 2021-2023 Cities Connecting Children to Nature cohort. We are sincerely grateful for their support and guidance.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6115b3f3ead544249d81a5f6/t/654049690a0e82706e02afe/1698711918584/SW+WA+Green+Schoolyards+Action+Plan+DRAFT+v10.30.23.pdf>

- Regionally, green schoolyards consistently include outdoor learning classrooms, inclusive/accessible playgrounds, nature play, learning gardens, tree and native plantings, paved loop paths, and green stormwater infrastructure.

Intertwine Alliance is a coalition working to preserve and nurture a healthy regional system of parks, trails and natural areas. <https://www.theintertwine.org/>

Take Learning Outside has reached more than 200 educators through professional learning, earning over 600 clock hours. TLO is ramping up for another 6 workshops in the 2025-26 school year, to reach even more educators.

<https://sites.google.com/esd112.org/taking-learning-outside/home?authuser=0>

The City of Vancouver is pursuing a Naturespaces approach to plantings that add more diverse nature, along with nature play features (logs, boulders, and sensory gardens) and inclusive playgrounds.

<https://www.cityofvancouver.us/government/department/parks-recreation-and-cultural-services/volunteer-programs/naturespaces/>

The Fort Vancouver Regional Library system offers the Check Out Washington backpack program. <https://www.fvrl.org/explore/washington-backpacks/>

The City of Camas Library manages a nature-smart library program.

<https://www.cityofcamas.us/library/page/nature-smart>

Friends of Trees (FOT) has partnered with the Clark Conservation District for a three-year planting project within Clark County making it possible for Friends of Trees to connect with area schools. <https://friendsoftrees.org/>

The Washington Trails Association has been instrumental in utilizing volunteers to help maintain and restore key trails at the Wildlife Refuge system in the greater Vancouver area, as well as local parks. <https://www.wta.org/>

Clark Public Utilities Pollinator Project, Clark College Bee Campus, the Vancouver Bee Project, and the City of Vancouver's Naturespaces program are increasing access to diverse and native plantings throughout local spaces, such as pollinator gardens on school grounds. Together, they engage youth in planting and monitoring new plantings, as well as in providing career training and curriculum support through hands-on projects.

- <https://www.clarkpublicutilities.com/about-cpu/public-documents/ceta/ceip/pollinator-project/>
- <https://www.clark.edu/about/visitors-guide/bee-campus/>
- <https://vancouverbeeproject.org/>

The Portland-Vancouver Canopy Collective utilized the Southwest Washington Green Schoolyards Action Plan to secure federal grant funding for planting trees at central community

schools, providing shade and outdoor learning opportunities. The grant also supports community events and career-development opportunities for youth. <https://www.pvcanopycollective.org/>

The Washington State University Extension Master Gardener Program was able to secure a grant from the Clark County Master Gardener Foundation (with support from SNAP-ED, a federal nutrition education program). The grant will fund a part-time garden coordinator to work with up to eight schools for recess garden programming, special project implementation with specific teachers, teacher support, and after-school programs.

<https://extension.wsu.edu/clark/master-gardeners/community-education/school-gardens/>

Clark County, WA. Climate Community Advisory Group The Community Advisory Group (CAG) for the Clark County Climate Project is supporting the county's efforts to implement new state climate change planning legislation (ES2HB 1181), in which the county is now required to add a Climate Change Element to its Comprehensive Plan by Dec. 31, 2025. The CAG is using a consensus-based approach and striving to provide a recommendation for Planning Commission and County Council consideration.

<https://clark.wa.gov/community-planning/community-advisory-group>

Fourth Plain Forward Climate Health Adaptation focuses on promoting the health of communities facing the immediate impacts of climate change along one of the highest risk area in Vancouver. Our project aims to implement educational outreach programs, advocate for health-focused environmental policies, and mobilize resources for health resilience during extreme weather events. <https://www.fourthplainforward.org/climate-health>

Washington Sustainable Schools Protocol

<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2024-06/wssp2023version.pdf>

Clark County Green Schools works with all local public and private schools in their sustainability efforts. We're here to encourage environmental leadership and give students tools to implement change in their schools. <https://clarkgreenschools.org/>

The City of Vancouver and Clark County Parks and Nature updated their Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plans for their park systems, ensuring proactive improvements to connect all to nearby nature following the LCNN accessibility site study workshop

- <https://www.cityofvancouver.us/city-managers-office/accessibility-and-inclusion-at-the-city-of-vancouver-for-people-with-disabilities/ada-self-evaluation-and-transition-plan-project/>
- <https://clark.wa.gov/public-works/parks-and-nature-ada-transition-plan>

Appendix B – Sections of the ripple effects map

Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature

Networking connections - truly being in the room and having conversations is powerful for learning what other people. Face to face connections.

I emailed someone randomly that was part of an organization in the network and didn't get a response, but then I got to meet someone else in the organization who really wanted to help us.

The face to face connection make it possible for me to get to the right person.

Networking - it's beyond networking because we are building deeper relationships. As people leave organizations and move to other organizations they are able to still be part of their network in their new organizations. Building a community has been a major outcome of the network.

Interconnectivity across organizations - collaboration among organizations in southwest Washington. Seeing those collaboration opportunities in full force in the field.

When we don't know an answer, we know who to send people to.

Relationships and connections. Having the opportunity to meet face to face. Maintaining relationships during COVID. When there's an opportunity or big idea, we have a familiar face to go to.

Connecting agencies and community based organizations. We started to talk about how we lift each other up as well especially when funding is uncertain.

Met at the Canoe event put on by the LCNN. Built a relationship there, then went to Stormwater Partners conference. Now one year later will be a presenter at that conference.

Knowing who to contact. Not only being in the room with someone, but having connection with organizations and they know who to contact in that organization.

Superpower of connections and thoughtful and purposeful introductions. There's a thoughtful behind the scenes thing that happens when Jane makes a connection. There's a deeper understanding of what the work is and how we can accomplish it together.

Project development and funding. Many times two or more organizations working together can create something that is more competitive as a project to be funded.

Introductions to specific community groups that are aligned with program goals. There have been introductions to different communities that we could serve and Jane could make those introductions because she knew about their needs and the fit. Getting programs to communities that do not have it.

There's joy in this work. In our region from a teacher perspective, they are really eager for this kind of work and it seems to give meaning and passion for the work they are doing with their students. Same for the students. On the programming end, this is also true for organizations.

The coming together face to face and understanding who the different organizations are in the region makes a big difference. The behind the scenes is the connective tissue, the LCNN is really important and it's understated but it is critical for making the work happen.

Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature

Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature continued

Convening a network community to increase equitable access to nature

programming end, this is also true for organizations.

The coming together face to face and understanding who the different organizations are in the region makes a big difference. The behind the scenes is the connective tissue, the LCNN is really important and it's understated but it is critical for making the work happen.

Site tours - have been informative and inspiring, places we didn't previously get to see. A bit of a lighter connection. Story about going to Webber Arboretum and later in the day went to another event and saw many of the same people.

Lots of connections with nonprofits that serve families and state and city partners, too.

Unexpected: Outreach activities that engage families through play and activities. Engagement and sharing resources

Today I have made connections to help my organization do more work and collaborate.

Unexpected: Making connections that you didn't expect to be useful, but they were in the long term.

Steady leadership has made relationship building easier. Space is there now to maintain relationships outside of meetings.

Strong community of "outdoor employees."

Solidified understanding of everyone's offerings.

Green Schoolyards workshop allowed me to make connections with people and communities I would not have access to. otherwise.

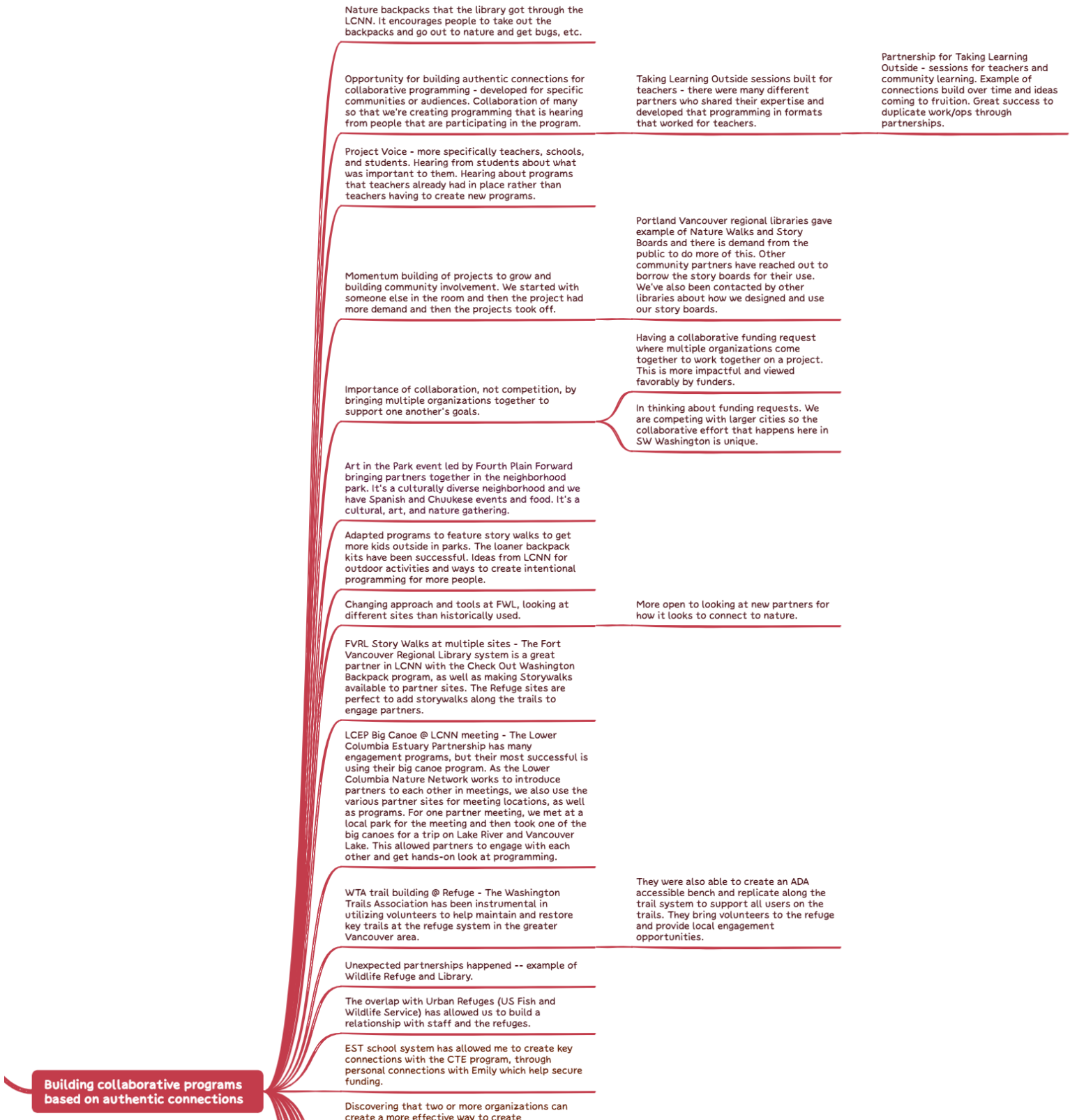
Highlight was going to Plas-Newydd Farm in Ridgefield. We did poetry and art while on the porch of this farm and talked about how we can connect people to nature using art as the medium. It was a reminder of being in community.

I personally have met so many colleagues around our region that I may have not had the chance to meet without the Network's partnership meetings. We reach out to other organizations, visit their sites, share goals and programs, learn about staffing, as well as challenges and opportunities. These opportunities to meet each other, learn more, build relationships, share resources and support the collective work has been invaluable.

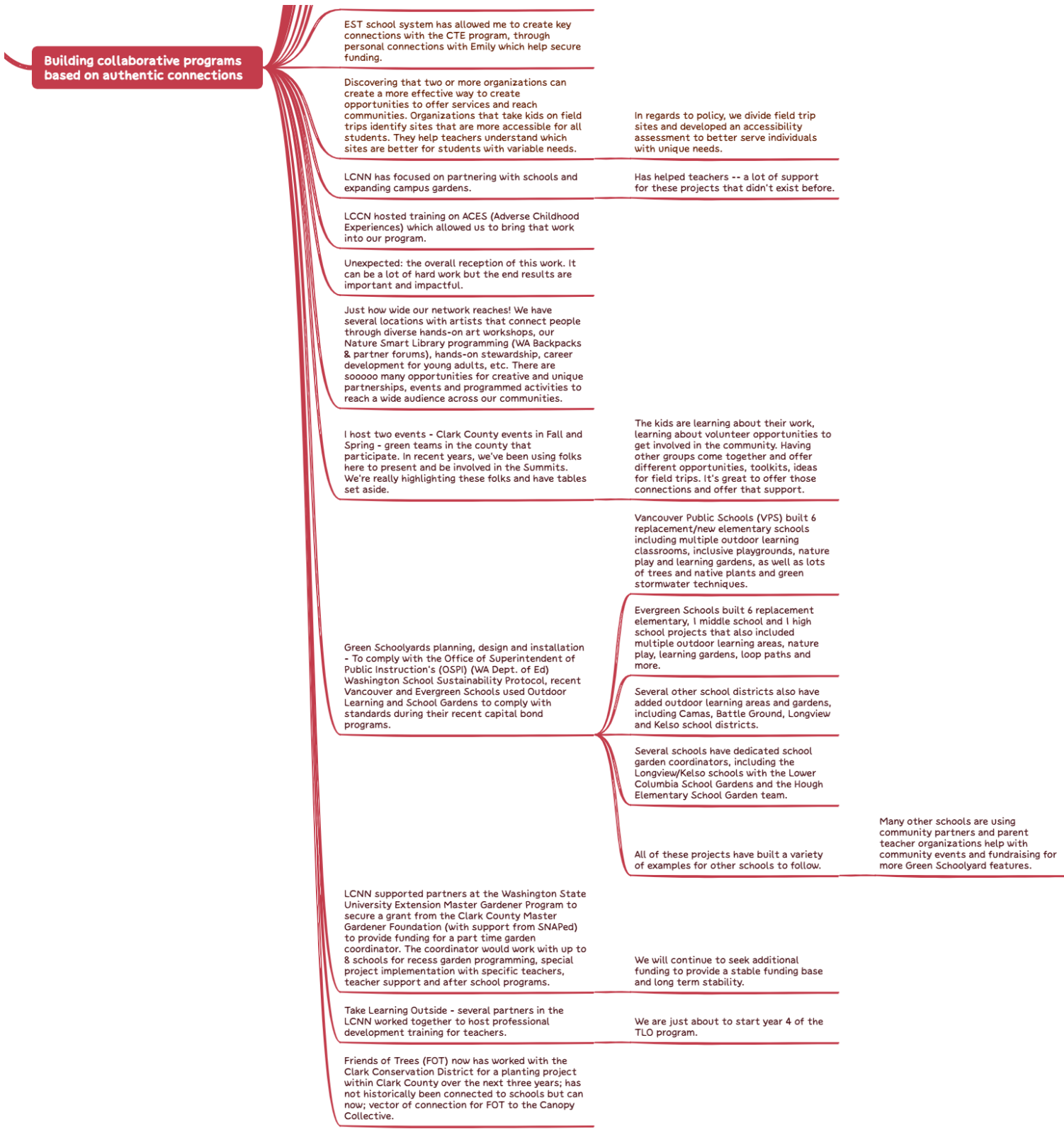
I was able to connect one of the members in my group with the Fort Vancouver Regional Libraries Volunteer Coordinator to help find additional volunteers for her organization.

Getting programming ideas from other organizations, and personal connections with other organizations so you can put a name to the face.

Building collaborative programs based on authentic connections



Building collaborative programs based on authentic connections continued



Coordinating and updating plans, policies, and practices to promote equitable access to nature

For example, the City of Vancouver has a Climate Action Plan, that ties with the Urban Tree Canopy Plan and the Park & Recreation Department's Comprehensive Plan that calls for 10-minute walks to parks and green spaces. These correlate with the Clark County Climate Action Plan and Fourth Plain Forward's Climate Action Work.

One of the key successes of the Nature Network has been the ability to partners to identify key plans for their organizations and learn where other organizations overlap, compliment, diverge, etc.

Green Schoolyards Plan - has been working on Climate Action plan for county and saw much overlap. There is much with tree planting and these connections are being made through LCNN and with the City and Climate Action.

Jane's involvement in designing pollinator gardens and guiding the education and conversations around them, helped people appreciate gardens that look different than what we're culturally used to.

Clark Public Utilities decided to be intentional about adding pollinator habitat -- Jane helped coordinate the first gardens and facilitated many useful contacts/connections that have made the program successful.

And it has been helpful to have a network of educators to collaborate with on student curriculum.

Brainstorming for access and increased access for all users, including children and youth with special health care needs.

Now Clark County Public Health is getting to connect with other county departments through monthly meetings with Parks and Nature staff in the Public Works Department to include a public health equity lens in cross-programmatic development.

Opportunity to go to training with Access Recreation (at Whipple Creek Park) - assess infrastructure for access as parks complete their inventory of parks and natural spaces.

The Green Schoolyards Plan has been key - took a long time to develop and now has a lot of great information and policies to work on.

Saw it evolve from start to finish with some very tangible things.

Green Schoolyard Plan was an incredible outcome.

Climate element of county's comprehensive plan has positive overlap with the Green Schoolyard Plan.

Evergreen Public Schools, the largest district in southwest WA created a Green Schoolyards Campus vision plan for all schools in the district. It includes conceptual level planning for all elementary level schools for diverse GSY features and plantings and general guidance for MS & HS schools. This document includes planning and policy documents to connect to regional and local plans and partners, detailed descriptions & examples of a wide variety of Green Schoolyard features and a resource section.

Whether projects are top down (district lead capital investments) or grass roots (school and partner led projects), the Facilities and Grounds team can review, advise and approve faster.

Both Vancouver and Evergreen schools also created a streamlined Green Schoolyard project approval process to help fast tract a variety of common projects, such as outdoor classrooms, seating, learning garden features and plantings, for the district level staff.

City has a climate action framework, but there is no clear champion of this at the city, but LCNN has pushed the process forward, kept pressure on staff/city as a whole. LCNN has encouraged more than checking the boxes; it is more systemic.

LCNN hosted a panel discussion and several joint workshops on accessibility with phenomenal regional/local experts. As a result, many organizations are updating ADA transition plans, provide more concise information about accessible sites and events, etc. We are all much more aware of how best to serve everyone in our community.

Through our collaboration with the Lower Columbia Nature Network, we have tried to focus more of our library programs to be outside of our buildings and get people out to their neighborhood parks and trails.

In regards to policy, we divide field trip sites and developed an accessibility assessment to better serve individuals with unique needs.

Cities and county have contracted to update their ADA transition plans for their park systems.

Accessibility workshop helped me think about barriers for individuals to access natural spaces.

Coordinating and updating plans, policies and practices to promote equitable access to nature

Creating a culture of opportunities for a green workforce and future stewards

Creating a culture of opportunities for green workforce and future stewards

Mentoring aspect.

Also for students that we work with - showing them different perspectives in the field.

Opportunity for young professionals to network and be part of this group -- Americorps youth have attended meetings and this is a great opportunity for them. An Americorps volunteer was really excited to get access and then did informational interviews with members of this group.

Workshops that we've had as a group. Monthly meeting topics have been great professional development for all of us - grant writing, volunteer coordination, collaborating with tribal partners, accessibility. Learning from each other and our experiences.

We all show up to support our community, including schools and teachers, through different activities through workshops and community events. Speaker about nature journaling. Author of Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults. Great guest speakers who come and share their knowledge and expertise.

An example is the way we learned to do site assessments so we were better prepared to serve the variety of students with accessibility needs at the different sites.

Experiential learning opportunities such as accessibility site study workshop that we did. A place for partners to learn something that wasn't central to our work but enhances the programs we offer when we look through a different lens of how different individuals encounter the program.

External support for students in the K-12 system.

Within network professional development for young professionals - including being part of the network.

Cities and county have contracted to update their ADA transition plans for their park systems.

Accessibility workshop helped me think about barriers for individuals to access natural spaces.

Having teachers in the room and folks who work in the schools who could identify gaps to make it a more successful program.

Having pilot program for youth climate leadership - initiated from folks who met through LCNN who knew how to build a good youth program and work through logistics and challenges.

We have partners who know what kinds of things kids are learning in the schools, including specific curriculum topics.

Led to meetings to discuss how to have lasting impact vs. a one-time project. How can they integrate to current. Portland Vancouver Tree Canopy Collective - add things responsive and in alignment with their values.

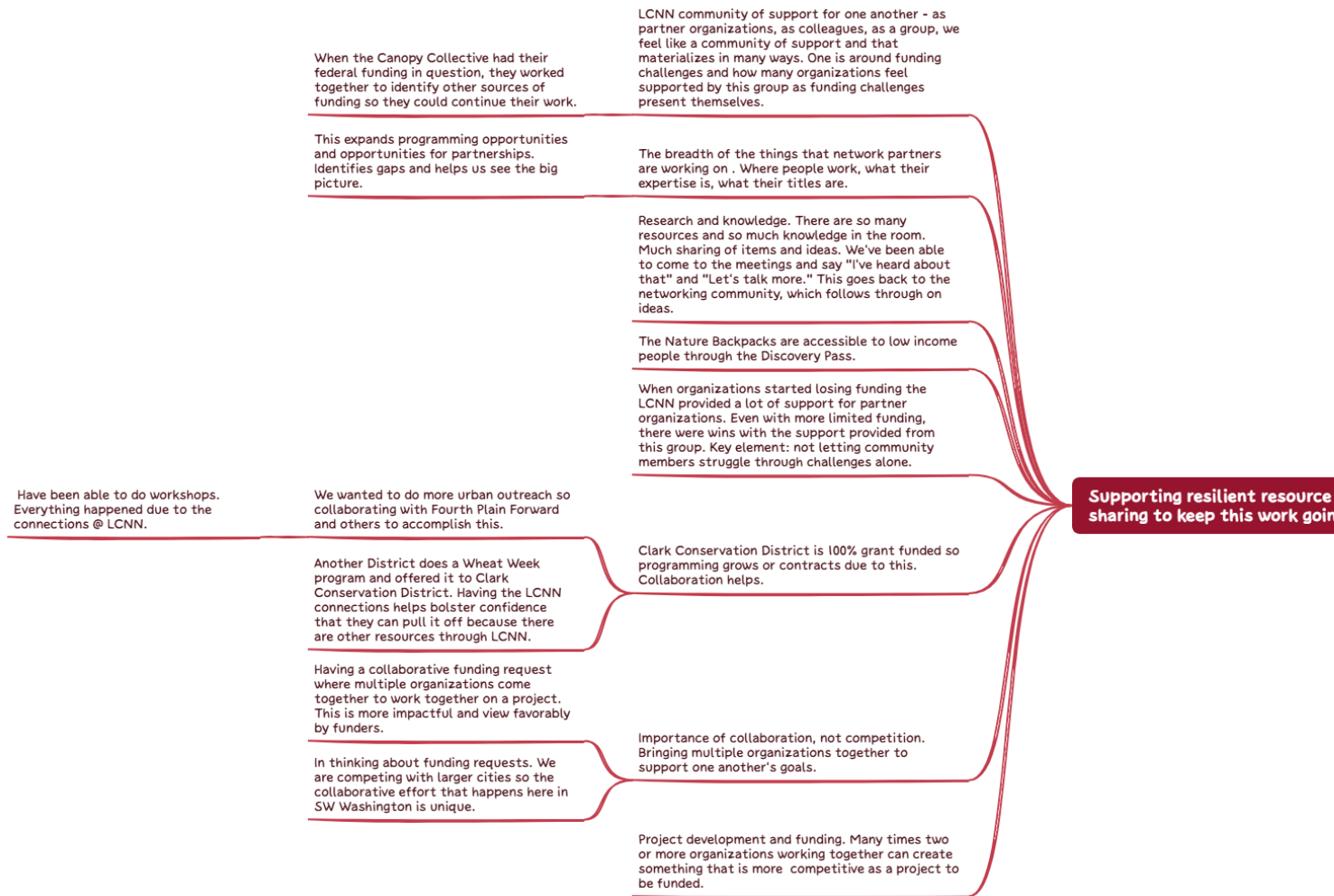
Project Voice was a beautiful success sourced by young community members. A key element was finding a speaker that directly relates to them. Future proof way of a of engaging with community.

This was a key way to get youth involved.

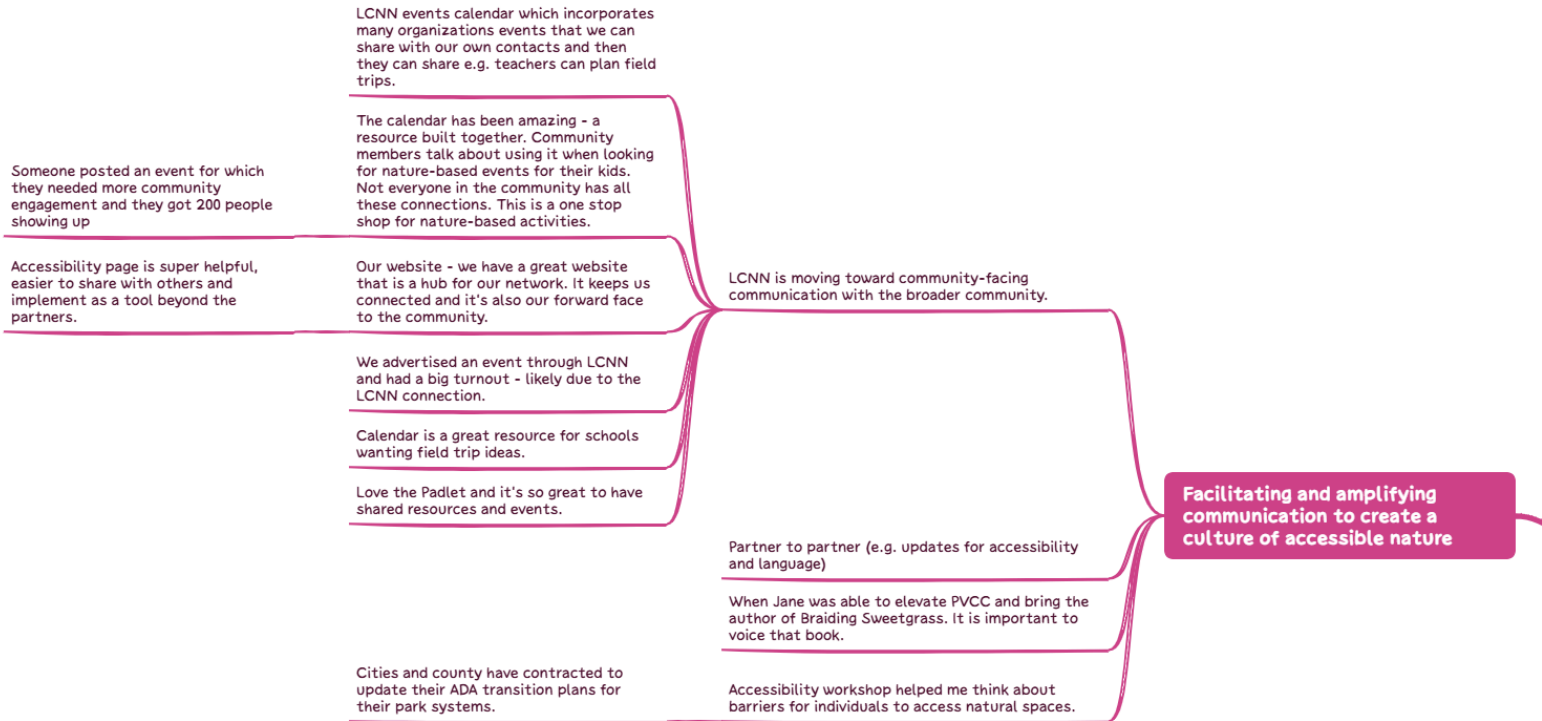
Clark County Green School Student Summits (twice per year) created an opportunity for the county's climate element planning project to participate in student activities at the Summit to get important engagement with youth.

While Green Schoolyard planning, design and implementation is a professional goal of mine (from the design standpoint), there is a tremendous amount of opportunity for our partners to collaborate and support school's and student successes, including joint teacher trainings, coordinated classroom instruction, field trips, lesson kits, on-campus plantings, stewardship opportunities, green career development, etc.

Supporting resilient resource sharing to keep this work going



Facilitating and amplifying communication to create a culture of accessible nature



Challenges moving forward

