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## **New field trip initiative ensures every Tacoma Public Schools student has equal access to out-of-classroom experiences**

*Metro Parks Tacoma is hosting thousands of children from three grades at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, Tacoma Nature Center, and Point Defiance Park*

Tacoma, WA: A group of children skipped down a muddy trail at Tacoma Nature Center, bending to examine nurse logs, gnarled tree roots and an ant hill next to an orange mushroom.

“This is the best day ever!” said Murphy Hinds, a second grader at Bryant Montessori.

Murphy is one of about 16,000 students guaranteed a field trip this school year due to a new initiative by Tacoma Public Schools, Metro Parks Tacoma and six other community partners.

“It has long been a goal to provide real world experiences for every student,” said Jen Crump, the district’s science instructional facilitator. “We want to connect our students with the community where they live and use this as a way for our students to see their learning have meaning and purpose.”

Although classes often take field trips throughout the school year, they can be dependent on funding, staffing and availability. The new initiative ensures every student has equal access to an out-of-classroom experience.

Each grade is provided with a location that ties in with their required curriculum. Field trips include the LeMay America’s Car Museum, Washington State History Museum, Museum of Glass, Symphony Tacoma, Foss Waterway Seaport and JA Finance Park.

Metro Parks is hosting kindergarteners at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, first graders at Tacoma Nature Center and second graders at Point Defiance Park.

The kindergarten and second grade students are led through zoo, aquarium, forest and beach activities by Science and Math Institute students studying early childhood education. They engage in scavenger hunts, collecting rocks, leaves and other natural items and discussing why certain animals would choose between habitats in the forest and beach. They also model and learn about pollination through a game of freeze tag.

Carrie Hampton, an Early Childhood Education teacher at SAMi, said the biggest benefits are apparent in the students' excitement at being in a new place.

"A large part of our population hasn't even been to Point Defiance Park," Hampton said. "Some have never been to a beach before or on the trails or even seen Puget Sound. This is helping our students get access."

Similarly, many of the kindergarteners who visited Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium for field trips were there for the first time and thrilled to see animals of all kinds.

A girl in the Kids' Zone area eagerly pointed to a turtle as it moved around in its exhibit, pointing and calling for her classmates to come see. As a group of students stopped to peer at penguins, they took turns calling out things they knew about penguins and the teacher added more facts.

The field trips focus on building off the natural curiosity of children by answering their questions and letting them guide the conversation through observations and face to face connections with animals and plants.

"Awakening a connection to nature and wildlife is central to our mission," said Sarah Oliver, deputy director at Point Defiance Zoo. "We're delighted to welcome every Tacoma kindergartener to the zoo so they can experience the awe and wonder of our animals up close."

There's a similar format for first graders visiting Tacoma Nature Center.

Students participate in a self-guided trail walk with an activity guide, play at Discovery Pond after learning about how camouflage helps animals survive, and touch various animal furs. They then meet Scooter, a three-toed box turtle, before matching baby and adult animals throughout the exhibits.

"It's all about exposure, having an experience and sparking their interest and curiosity in nature," said Michele Cardinaux, supervisor at the Nature Center. "For everything that we do, we're trying to facilitate experiences that help people gain an appreciation and understanding of the natural world."

The new field trip program to the zoo, Tacoma Nature Center and Point Defiance Park is funded by Tacoma Public Schools and Metro Parks Tacoma, with support from The Zoo Society.

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