

August 9, 2025

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the recent changes to the outdoor education internship program. Having served as the site principal for 30 years I take personal pride in having helped to develop what could be considered one of the best outdoor ed internships in the state. Mark Nolan and I were very intentional about initiating practices and procedures that provided interns with an understanding of every aspect of the program and opportunities to develop as skilled educators. Through ongoing inservice and mentorship, along with the senior staff, we promulgated the idea that beyond teaching the students we were tasked with serving the interns a program of learning and enrichment. Through the years this was carefully planned and developed to give interns leadership skills, to build autonomy, create community, learn best practices in teaching, problem solving, conflict resolution, group management, collaboration, communication and readiness for what to do next beyond the internship.

I believe that the changes made by bringing in 5 additional interns may have a negative effect on the quality of the internship. It requires a lot of hard work by the senior staff to provide what I have outlined above. Without adding additional senior staff to do this they will be less able to give the needed personal attention. These changes were made on the false premise that the law requires that interns can only work 30 hours/week. I have not seen any evidence of this. Also, the decision to make such a drastic change in the program was a unilateral decision without the consultation of the practitioners or an understanding of the program. In my opinion this is an example of failed leadership. Furthermore, a change such as this should be carefully thought out and developed over time not imposed a few months before the start of the program. This decision has created another problem, that of housing. Throughout the years we have worked continually with the YMCA to provide adequate staff housing. We had finally reached some agreements that showed progress. Now, unfortunately the housing situation has once again been compromised and the quality diminished.

I realize that it may be too late for this year to return to status quo but I would encourage future changes to be collaboratively handled with a thorough understanding of the program and the program needs. The senior staff should be involved in suggesting alternatives and providing details along with adequate time to put changes into place. The outdoor ed program has positively touched thousands of lives including, students high school cabin leaders, teachers and staff. I don't doubt that it will always do so but my hope is that it will continue to provide the highest quality program that it is infamously known to do.

Sincerely

Steve Van Zandt
Naturalist 1977-1981
Site Director/Principal 1993-2023

Jenna Deane
3030 Alderwood Ave
Bellingham, WA 98225
jennacorindeane@gmail.com
808-342-5661

August 8, 2025

San Mateo County Office of Education
101 Twin Dolphin Drive
Redwood City, CA 94065

Dear Superintendent McGee and SMOE Board Members,

I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the recent decision to cap the SMOE internship program at 30 hours per week and to expand the number of interns as a way to avoid offering benefits to those working full-time hours and without consideration of housing feasibility.

As an alum of the SMOE program, I can say unequivocally that this internship is unlike any other. The transformational experience it offers, for both the interns and the students we serve, cannot be accomplished in a 30-hour workweek. The program's strength lies in its immersive, all-in culture of service, collaboration, and mentorship. It demands and inspires full-time commitment, not because it's easy, but because it's meaningful. It is precisely this level of dedication that has helped generations of interns grow into educators, leaders, and changemakers. It helped me launch my career, first as a Garden Educator, then Program Manager, and now as a Program Director and startup founder.

The abrupt nature of this decision, without meaningful consultation with program staff or the broader SMOE community, is troubling. Even more concerning is the suggestion that this shift was driven by an attempt to avoid providing interns with the benefits they rightfully deserve for full-time work. These young professionals give their hearts and souls to this program and to the students of San Mateo County. They deserve better from their employer.

I urge you to reconsider and reverse this decision. Reinstate the full-time nature of the internship. Invest in the interns by offering benefits that reflect the true value of their work. Preserve the integrity of a program that has touched so many lives. Be a positive example to the students and community you serve by standing firm on your support of outdoor education.

Please do not let short-term budgetary concerns erode a legacy built over years of passion, innovation, and student-centered service. SMOE is more than a program; it's a cornerstone of what is best about the San Mateo County Office of Education.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Jenna Deane', with a stylized, flowing script.

Jenna Deane
SMOE Intern, 2007-2008
SMOE Village Leader 2008-2011

Attention Superintendent McGee,

I am writing to express my deep concern and disappointment regarding the decision to cap SMOE interns at 30 hours per week and increase the number of interns without adequate support or housing. As someone who has had the privilege of working for the SMOE internship, I can say without hesitation that this change threatens the very heart of what makes the program meaningful and transformative, for interns and students alike.

When I was an intern in the SMOE program, I was given the rare and invaluable gift of hands-on experience, and this real, immersive learning that showed me how to best support students in the field of outdoor education. Through thoughtful mentorship and the example of caring, intentional program leaders, I learned not only how to teach but also how to lead with kindness and gentleness. It completely transformed me as an educator and as a person. Because of SMOE, I went on to build a career in outdoor education with the San Diego County Office of Education. That path was only possible because of the depth and integrity of this internship, something that simply cannot be replicated under a 30-hour limit.

SMOE is not a part-time job. It's a full-hearted, full-time commitment to kids, growth, and each other. This all-in, life-changing commitment to the community cannot be replicated under these restrictions. Changing the foundation of the program by limiting interns to 30 hours not only diminishes the internship experience but also compromises the quality of education and support provided to the students San Mateo County Office serves.

Furthermore, choosing to focus on legal liability instead of fair compensation and support for interns contradicts the spirit of equity and care that the SMOE program represents. Instead of avoiding obligations, the County Office should embrace its role in fostering a sustainable, ethical internship that honors the labor and dedication of its participants.

I respectfully urge you to reconsider this decision. This isn't just a policy change; it's the unraveling of a legacy. This program deserves better. The students deserve better.

Respectfully,



Abby Van Artsdalen
abby.vanartsdalen@sdcoe.net
Outdoor Education Program Assistant
San Diego County Office of Education

Dear Superintendent McGee,

My name is Kaylee Reynolds, and I am now the Executive Director of a nonprofit camp that provides accessible outdoor experiences to individuals with disabilities of all ages. I write to you not only in that capacity but as a proud alum of the San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE) internship program—a foundational experience that set me on a path toward a deeply impactful and fulfilling career.

The SMOE internship wasn't just a job. It was a transformative chapter in my life that taught me how to lead, how to serve, and how to create spaces where all people can connect to nature and to one another. It was a stepping stone that led me to where I am today—guiding an organization that lives out many of the same values of inclusion, environmental stewardship, and youth empowerment that I learned during my time at SMOE.

I was heartbroken to learn that the County Office has decided to cap intern hours at 30 per week, without consulting the staff or considering the long-term damage such a policy will inflict on this legacy program. This decision, driven by a desire to avoid providing benefits, reflects a profound misunderstanding of what the internship requires and what it gives in return—not only to the interns, but to the thousands of students whose lives are changed through this immersive, powerful experience.

SMOE is not a 30-hour-a-week commitment. It is a full-hearted, full-time immersion into environmental education, community living, and mentorship. It shapes young professionals and ignites a passion for service and equity that ripples outward for years to come. I am living proof of that.

To reduce the internship to a budget line is to undermine one of the County's most meaningful investments in education, leadership development, and environmental justice. I urge you to reconsider this decision, reinstate full-time hours, and offer the benefits these interns deserve. SMOE is a legacy worth protecting—for the sake of future students, interns, and communities across California

Sincerely,

Kaylee Reynolds

Executive Director, Camp Tuolumne Trails

SMOE Intern Alumni 2021-2022

07/31/2025

Dear Superintendent Nancy McGee,

My name is Lily, but my coworkers and students know me as "Ladybug". I am a current Village Leader at San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE). I was an intern in the 2023-2024 school year, and this past year was my first year as a Village Leader. I am writing to express concerns about the changes being made to our program for the upcoming school year.

As a Village Leader at SMOE, I wear many hats. Sometimes, I describe my job to people outside the program by saying, "I'm like a college RA but for people who have graduated". Sometimes, I say "I'm a nature teacher". Sometimes, I say "I manage a staff of 11 interns". Sometimes, I say "I'm a caretaker for my students". It's hard to describe to someone outside of the program exactly what I do, because in truth, I do a little bit of everything. I spend my days hiking with fifth-graders, training Interns to be the most compassionate educators they can be, singing songs about dirt and worms, helping staff navigate interpersonal conflicts, consoling homesick students, dealing with student issues through positive discipline, lesson planning, meeting with my co-workers to examine our program and improve it, giving feedback and advice to Interns, announcing meals to a dining hall full of 200 students, and so much more. When I compare myself to my college friends, who are now several years into their careers, I know that I am the happiest among the bunch. My job is challenging; I often work long hours and end up feeling physically and emotionally depleted, but it is the most rewarding job I could ever have. I know a day will come when I have to leave this job, and I know that no other job will ever be as emotionally fulfilling. I will forever be in search of something like this.

Unfortunately, for this upcoming school year, my job is changing in ways I have not fully been able to process or understand. As a result of the shifts in what qualifies as an "Intern", I will go from training a team of 11 to a team of 16. I will, on average, work 15 more hours a week than those people, closer to 30 more hours a week for the first several weeks of the program. I will spend my hours off working with the rest of the Senior Staff to figure out how to make sure our students are being taken care of with the staffing we have, and probably stepping in quickly to cover some of those gaps. This change was not a decision I had any say in, and I was informed very last-minute that these changes to my job would take place.

As a Village Leader, I pay \$223 a week to live on site. In the 2024-2025 school year, this was ideal. I lived with two other Village Leaders, and it was essential to my mental health to be able to come home, unwind, and talk to them about my long, stressful day. With the addition of 5 new interns, not only will my workload and stress levels increase, but we do not have enough housing for everyone. Either an Intern or my supervisor, the Senior Naturalist, will have to move into my home. Not only does this feel inappropriate to have people on different steps of the hierarchy chain living in the same house, but I lose my safe space to unwind. The quality of my work-provided housing is decreasing, and my compensation and rent are not changing. This does not feel right to me. The quality of my housing directly correlates to the quality of teaching, instruction, and training I can give. I want the best for the Interns and my students, but in these living conditions, I fear my best will not be good enough.

These changes that we are being asked to implement this upcoming school year will not only add to my already intense workload, but will also dramatically alter the experience given to our interns and students. By having interns work under 30 hours a week, they will not be able to

bond with their students. A huge goal of our program is to help students develop their social-emotional skills. By reducing the number of hours interns are allowed to work with their students, they lose valuable time engaging in meaningful social-emotional teaching. Interns will receive less experience working meals and evening programs, where they are asked to lead large groups of up to 200 students. This is an essential piece of professional development and makes our interns confident and competitive candidates for future employment. With 16 of them to rotate through these tasks, none of them will have enough time to develop the competency that is up to our standards. The reduction in hours also leads to less instructional time, normally spent at inservices, shadowing other educators or programs, or receiving teaching feedback from me and the other members of senior staff. Not only is that an injustice to our interns, but it goes against the very nature of what an internship is.

Our students would also lack the time to establish a relationship with their Naturalist. Being a residential program, most of our students have never been away from home before. Naturalists need to spend time with their students and build trust so that learning (and fun) can take place. The most rewarding parts of my job are when I'm not teaching, but I'm spending time with my students. Maybe I'm sitting on the floor in their cabin, singing them to sleep with my guitar. Maybe I'm chatting with the quiet students at the back of the line. Maybe we're all laughing together during a picnic lunch. These are the moments our Interns will have to miss to stop them from working too many hours.

Another group impacted by the reduction in hours is our high school volunteers, whom we call Cabin Leaders. At SMOE, Interns have a coaching and mentorship relationship with their assigned Cabin Leaders. Interns guide Cabin Leaders and help them form professional yet powerful bonds with their students, building confidence in teaching and leading groups. Interns give feedback to their Cabin Leaders and check in with them daily to make sure all participants in our program are feeling safe, happy, and healthy. The reduction in hours would force us to cut Intern/Cabin Leader check-ins from our program, or would force another staff member without an established relationship to perform those check-ins, making them less effective.

One of the most beautiful parts of our program is the relationship our interns form with each other. Our community is small and close-knit. Interns stay members in the community, coming to events and visiting for decades after their internship is over. By expanding our staff by 25%, we lose some of this closeness, which is so unique to San Mateo Outdoor Education.

While fair wages and fewer hours will lead to less burnout amongst staff, which is something I've been wanting since I was an intern in 2023, this change is not the solution. I would love to open the conversation and work together with the powers that be to come up with a system that would preserve the magic, traditions, and values of our program, which has existed for over 60 years. One potential solution is that we stop calling this program an Internship and instead call it Seasonal Employment, or something else. The name of the position is not nearly as important as the structure and system that has been in place for several decades.

I'm excited to further discuss these changes and make improvements to this program, but leaving the leadership team, the people who are on the ground and know this program like no one else, out of these conversations is what leads to disaster. I don't want our program to lose its magic.

One of our main values that we preach over and over to our students each week is that we hope they "realize their impact", whether that means on the planet, on their peers, etc. As you read through these letters and reflect on the changes taking place, I hope you realize your impact. Realize the power you have, and think about the fifth graders, Cabin Leaders, teachers, interns, and senior staff who are impacted by these choices that we have been completely powerless over.

Thank you for your time.

All the best,
Lily "Ladybug" Tatusko (she/her)

July 30, 2025

Dear Superintendent Magee,

I am writing to express my deep concern over the proposed changes to San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE)'s program this coming school year. I am a former SMOE naturalist intern (2023-2024). I still work as an outdoor educator; I am about to begin a new role at Exploring New Horizons Outdoor School (ENH).

My year as an intern at SMOE changed my life. Where I had previously been unsure how to pursue my interest in education and outdoor work, SMOE's rigorous, thoughtful program gave direction to my career and left me with new skills and confidence. SMOE's training not only improved my ability to lead small groups but also gave me large-group management skills, provided me tools for teaching English language learners, increased my science and nature knowledge, promoted my ability to mentor students and high school Cabin Leaders, and developed my teamwork skills.

The hours each week I spent working directly with students—leading hikes, teaching science concepts, and creating magical moments of nature connection—left me passionate about nature education, shaping my ongoing personal and professional pursuits. For example, my experience teaching English language learners as a SMOE intern gave me the expertise and flexibility to teach in Mandarin, my second language, while completing a fellowship at an educational garden in Taiwan during the 2024-2025 school year. Moreover, my development of these skills at SMOE made me a competitive applicant when I applied to my current employer, ENH, and will continue to do so as I pursue future education roles.

Unfortunately, it is precisely these skills that incoming interns stand to lose under the county's new plan. Not only will they have to miss ten hours of SMOE's already compact staff training, but they will also lose many hours each week of time working directly with students, inhibiting their development of teaching tools and group management skills. For example, had I been allowed to lead only one large-group activity every several weeks (such as meals, campfires, or large-group presentations), rather than two to four a week as is SMOE's current model, I would not have been able to develop competency managing large groups, which would also have reduced my hirability as an educator.

Of course stress, burnout, and fair compensation are issues for naturalists, as they are for most educators. However, the county's proposed solution of hiring additional interns and reducing all the interns to part-time employees will diminish the value of the internship and the program as a whole, leaving interns undertrained, inexperienced, and incapable of providing the high quality outdoor education experiences that San Mateo families expect from SMOE. In addition, this solution will simply transfer the stress and burnout to the Village Leader naturalists, who will not only have to train and mentor five additional interns without additional compensation, but who will also have to work extra hours each week to make up for the time the interns will no longer be able to cover.

As a former intern, a current outdoor educator, and a beneficiary of SMOE's excellent educator training program, I implore you not to rashly implement a measure that will leave interns undertrained, senior staff overworked, and students underserved. The SMOE training program transformed my life. Please let it continue to do so for future students and educators.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Levinson-Muth (SMOE intern 2023-2024)

To whom it may concern,

I've recently come to know of the prospected changes that are happening to the SMOE internship program and I'm reaching out to share my story and ask those in power to reconsider this cut. The changes in place will heavily impact employees of SMOE and every student lucky enough to experience the magic this community has to offer.

My name is Kelly "Canyon" Greenberg, and I was an intern at SMOE during the 2023-2024 school year, and I was lucky enough to return to sub for about nine weeks of the 2025-2026 school year. I witnessed two years of intern groups in the beginning of the year, and got to experience the joy, love, and family that was cultivated throughout and towards the end of the school year. The way the program is structured is fundamental for forging strong community, which is what makes SMOE the experience that it is for students. As students filter in week after week, they not only get to experience the magic of the outdoors and independence, but they get to be a part of the SMOE family, being cared for and seeing how we care for each other, a model for community and passion for the people we share this world with and environmental stewardship.

Not only is the structure of the program fundamental to achieving what we do with students, but it also personally and professionally affects every intern who is lucky enough to have this experience. I went into my internship with SMOE the school year after graduating college, and I never could have expected it to be as all consuming and growth based as it was. Thanks to my internship, since then I have excelled in public speaking to large groups, crowd management, and organizing complex schedules for myself and others, as well as being inspired and passionate to be a steward of our planet and always push for work that is engaging and comes from the heart. At SMOE I not only grew as a professional, but I experienced community and interpersonal relationships beyond what I could have imagined, and the structure of the work as a team cultivated that for all of us.

I attended CSU Chico from 2019-2023, and worked for the Adventure Outings program that brings students outdoors in all aspects. Late in my senior year, we faced a full cut to the program proposed by the board. In reaction, myself and hundreds of others attended meetings, wrote letters, and spoke up for this program that had affected so many people in such a significant and positive way. In the end, the program was saved, and it thankfully continues to make the outdoors accessible to Chico State students and the community of Chico. I'm currently reminded of this with the prospected negative changes to the SMOE internship, and I hope that public action can save this special place. Outdoor education and exploration faces cuts constantly in so many manners, and it shows a lack of understanding of the importance of getting outside and sharing community. Our words are all we have in this situation to make a stand and prove how significant programs like SMOE are for the youth.

I urge you to hear the words of myself and the others who are making statements to save this program. It has functioned and flourished as it is for over 60 years, and these changes proposed

would bring what delicate magic has been created to an abrupt and brutal halt. Thank you for hearing my words. Please save SMOE!

Best, Kelly "Canyon" Greenberg

Dear Superintendent McGee,

I am writing as a proud alum of the SMOE internship to respectfully ask that you reconsider the recent decision to cap intern hours at 30 per week.

The SMOE program changes lives — not only for interns like myself, but for the thousands of students whose relationship to nature, learning, and themselves is forever altered by their time at outdoor ed.

In an age when children are increasingly encouraged to spend time indoors, tethered to screens and computer-based schoolwork, opportunities for deep, meaningful connection with the natural world are rare. SMOE provides that connection. It gives students the chance to explore, discover, and develop true confidence in themselves — outside of a classroom and without a screen in sight. If we weaken the program, we weaken that critical spark.

During my year in SMOE, I received a letter from a parent whose child had attended our program. She told me that her son came home more confident with his peers, happier day to day, and — to her astonishment — asking the whole family to go on hikes together. That kind of transformation doesn't come from textbooks or homework. It comes from immersive experiences, guided by interns who are fully present and committed — which requires full-time hours and appropriate support.

Capping interns at 30 hours a week might reduce costs in the short term, but the long-term cost is far greater: a generation of children who never learn to care about nature, and thus never fight to protect it. At a time when natural spaces are already losing funding and attention, SMOE is one of the few programs successfully cultivating environmental stewardship, curiosity, and joy in young people — and to continue doing that, interns must be treated as the full-time educators they are, with hours and benefits that allow them to sustain their commitment to this demanding work.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration. SMOE is more than an internship — it is an investment in future generations.

Sincerely,
Eric Grossman
SMOE Intern 2016

Burgundy Edwards
burgundyedwards5@gmail.com

2nd of August, 2025
San Mateo County Office of Education

Dear Superintendent Nancy Magee,

My name is Burgundy Edwards, a former SMOE naturalist intern of the 2022-2023 cohort. I'm writing to you today as I am disheartened to hear of the recent decision to cut the internship hours from 40 to 30. This cut of hours will cause a great loss to the true magic of the SMOE program and the ripple effect that it has on the kids that get to come and experience one week of connection and community in the wondrous redwoods, and the naturalists that get to lead them and learn from them. In this short letter, I will briefly explain my personal experience of the internship program and its impact, and the three most vital and potentially threatened aspects if hours were cut.

As a graduate of environmental studies in 2022, I wanted to pursue a job that would help the natural world around me. Little did I know the first job I took post-grad would forever change me and shape me to be the person I am today. The culture of curiosity and care of the natural environment that this program forms starts with the **immersion week**, where naturalist interns get to experience the program from a student's point of view. This greatly assists naturalists who may not have had a super outdoorsy background or who were not as comfortable being playful and silly. Immersion week is a time to expand your comfort zone and explore the land you'll be teaching in, connect with the people you'll be sharing it with, and every minute of it is formative for the practical skills, logistics, and magic naturalists carry on to the students.

That leads me to the next aspect of the program that is threatened with the decrease in hours, which is arguably most important: the **bond with the students**. A cut in hours means an intern wouldn't be able to run every program, and the kids' bonds would lessen because they would not have that face time with their assigned naturalist or be able to see them in different settings. It is imperative to have a trail group that you can interact with both on and off the trail to form trust and build a foundation of care between the students. I have personal experience in seeing how greatly a child's social interactions and behaviors can change just within four days with leaders who know how to best care for the students. And that knowledge and care come from actual time spent. Students, their growth, and their ability to connect to others and the natural environment around them are the core of the SMOE program, and naturalist interns need to have the tools and time to contribute to the students' success.

Lastly, the potential cut in hours will lead to a **loss of professional development opportunities** for interns. Professional development is essential for interns to learn from senior staff, community members, and professionals who have vital skills and knowledge to share. It's also a time to connect what students are learning in the classroom with hands-on experience in the outdoors. A time to collaborate and brainstorm how to best ignite the passion to protect

natural spaces, the curiosity to learn about them, and how to utilize social emotional learning tools to aid students in developing self and social awareness and responsible decision making. It also supports interns in their personal development as young professionals. It's a time for the intern to look inward and truly assess what they may want in a career and what they wish to take from this formative, and fleeting moment of magic in the redwoods. A time where interns can learn practical skills applicable to any job, and how to best show up as a community member.

I met the best people I've ever known, grew more than I ever have personally and professionally, and felt I truly made an impact on the lives of students and planted a sense of wonder and care within them. That is what the internship planted within me, and that is what I will continue to carry on as I step into the field of sustainability, which at its core is community. I may not have had the ability to learn as much as I did about community, the ecology around me, and how to best interact with and engage students if I were only working 30 hours a week.

To summarize, a cut in hours for the internship program could mean future interns not being able to receive the same level of immersion into the ecosystem and community, professional development to help shape and build them as people and professionals, or have as strong of a bond with the students, and that's who it's all for.

I urge you to reconsider this matter, and I thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,
Burgundy Edwards

Dear Superintendent McGee,

I'm writing to urge that you undo the changes recently made to shorten the hours for workers in the SMOE internship program. I'm a 2012 alum of the same program, and I've kept in touch with many of my former SMOE colleagues who've stayed in the Bay Area. A couple are working in K-12 education, another in a local community college district. I myself am an assistant professor at a local research university. In my teaching today, I still turn back to pedagogical practices I was trained on at SMOE. I know many others who've passed through the SMOE internship program have gone on to devote their careers to education. Simply, the training provided by the SMOE internship is being put to practice in educating the elementary, college, and doctoral students of the Bay Area. The way the internship is structured, a shift to 30 hours/week would significantly disrupt the institutional culture, and could threaten the viability of the internship program. These changes would negatively impact SMOE's ability to recruit skilled educators and the quality of the training the program provides. To disrupt this pipeline for local educators would be a disservice.

Sincerely,
David J.X. González, PhD

To whom it may concern at SMCOE:

My name is Derek McGovern, and I worked at San Mateo Outdoor Education for three years. My first year was as a naturalist intern and the next two years as a full time lead naturalist. I know the program well inside and out, and I can say with certainty that the current changes being made to the program will negatively affect full time senior staff, the incoming naturalist interns, and the students who attend the program.

With the addition of five more naturalist intern staff, the senior staff will now have to entirely rework the program to fit the "30 hour per week" cap. This will be a difficult and time-consuming task to be done at the beginning of the school year, taking up time they should be using to train the new staff. And to add on to that, they now have 5 more staff that need training. Also, with the addition of 5 more staff on, the housing situation becomes a lot more dire.

The San Mateo Outdoor Education program is built around training interns to become future educators and building their teaching and leading skills, and with this 30 hour cap, they will miss out on valuable opportunities for training and honing their skills. Before being an intern at San Mateo Outdoor Education, I was a classroom teacher for three years with two teaching credentials. I came into being an intern with a lot of teaching and leading experience, but I can confidently say that my year as an intern was the most valuable year in my education career when it came to growing my teaching craft. To enact this 30 hour cap would rob interns of this opportunity for growth.

Having been a student, high school volunteer cabin leader, naturalist, and teacher (I now work in Belmont Redwood Shores School District as a teacher and brought my 5th grade students to Outdoor Ed last year), a huge part of Outdoor Ed is the "magic" that is created throughout the week. A big part of this "magic" is building a connection with your naturalist who leads you throughout the week. With the 30 hour cap, changes will need to be made that will limit naturalist-student teaching time, which will not allow for this special connection to be made. It is going to be hard getting my students excited about going to Outdoor Ed this year knowing that the program I know and love will no longer be as good as it once was or could be.

The truly disheartening part of this entire ordeal is that it seems this decision was made not with any thought to how it would affect the people (staff, interns, students) involved in the program, but only the bottom line of the county office. A truly legendary program is being hamstrung simply to save some dollars, and that isn't right.

Sincerely,

Derek McGovern

To Nancy Mcgee and the SMCOE school board,

I am writing to exclaim my shock and disappointment over the increased hiring of staff in lieu of benefits for the original 11 interns.

I worked for SMOE for over 5 years; first as an intern in 2018-2019 then as a Senior Staff member when the program reopened after Covid. I know this program pretty intimately and I can confidently say I know how much work it takes to run this internship program in order to make it known as the "Stanford of Outdoor School Mentorship Programs" among the residential school teaching programs. I know how hard our senior staff go above and beyond to make sure our interns and students are learning and growing in a safe environment mentally and emotionally. The SMOE internship is a finely crafted work and life shaping experience that works because it has been carefully tuned for the last 30+ years and I have personally seen how small changes to the program can have huge impacts in unforeseen ways; both positively and negatively affecting the program.

If hours are reduced and staff is added on instead of giving benefits it will burden the program more than it helps the program. Logistically speaking, there is limited space on campus for all of the current staff to live on site; even if the construction of the replacements for the current housing was finished it would still not be enough. Adding 5 more people will add more stress due to unexpected variables such as transportation, dietary needs, cost of professional development activities and trail resources, etc. A lot of the experiences that SMOE offers to the staff as a whole will be lost just due to the increase in size. This seems to be a poor trade off for not wanting interns to work more than 30 hours to avoid having to give benefits to full time employees.

Teachers already don't make enough in classroom jobs that are not as demanding on the body. In addition to potential hiking injuries outdoor educators have to deal with students with sickness, anxiety, transmissible bugs and parasites like lice and pinworms, and on top of that the site is an hour away on windy roads from the closest Kaiser doctors office. As it stands, if interns don't work they don't get paid which just encourages them to accept working when sick and neglect their health. Adding more people, even if they aren't actively on trail that week, increases the likelihood that someone can get sick especially if they can't use a sick day to take care of themselves. Even if there are more interns that could be substitutes on site on site what will they be doing if/when they reach their eventual 30 hour mark?

I also believe that by making this job a "part time job" in a place that is as remote as La Honda is not practical because there are not really other jobs that interns can supplement their income with that fit the hours and rotations that SMOE staff are

expected to work. There are also not as many opportunities for interns to find outdoor school teaching employment in the area after the internship as there used to be, and although there are some abilities to network with teachers there will inevitably be more competition for less opportunity in this field of work.

One final point I'd like to make is that the magic of SMOE would also be strained if there were more people working less hours. This metric is impossible to quantify on paper but anyone who has actually spent a week of program at Camp Jones Gulch during outdoor ed will be able to feel through the bond of community that is fostered at SMOE. In my opinion, the underlying principle of the internship when I worked is that we all are in it together and we worked scientifically, physically, mentally and emotionally to teach the students to make the world a better place. The Village Leader Naturalist job is a labor of love and the VLs do everything they can to support all 11 interns. This takes time and if every hour that VLs spent on improving the interns on and off trail was actually counted it would be an extra 2-5 hours of work per week easily. This work isn't seen because it's hard to calculate but it adds to the overall quality of the interns when they are teaching through the year and once they leave. If the intern load is increased then each intern will get less mentorship and group cohesion will break down. Just like with physical space when you have too many people there is not enough room for the VLs to be able to support everybody as they did. If every intern is told to only work 30 hours it discourages investment on the part of the intern into developing skills and lesson plans for the program. It also impacts the way the students, the cabin leaders and the schools will look at the message that we send about our community; that San Mateo County Office of Education cares more about quantity than about quality. I would much rather see the internship lose an intern so the other 10 can get benefits than see the internship dissolve into 16 "part timers" that are still working too hard for not enough pay.

As a former VL, I am sad that I had to leave SMOE partially because I miss all of the attention and intention that this program brings to students, cabin leaders and interns and staff alike. I also personally feel that people that have applied to SMOE more on word of mouth recommendations because of the magic that we offered and the sense of community that was carried on by former coworkers to other outdoor schools. I think that the county does not truly understand the scope of this program and I think that the program and the people in it will suffer more than the budget would suffer if the current allotment of interns had medical benefits. I feel like this change has already negatively stressed and impacted faith in the program and the talent that the program could've produced this upcoming school year and this school year hasn't even begun yet.

SMOE has been a 'ship of Theseus' since it's first pilot program in the 60s. I hope that it will still be able to keep afloat after adding 5 more people to do less work, but I fear that

the changes will do more to lead the ship aground than to lead to better teachers and stewards of community.

Ziggy "Jackalope" Bates

'18-'19 Intern

'21-'25 VL

Dear Nancy McGee and SMCOE Board,

I am writing about the decision to cut hours for the SMOE interns. While I am glad that the interns will be paid more per hour, restructuring the program to add interns and cut hours will result in more work for an already underpaid senior staff. It will also mean interns won't get the training needed to perform the basic duties of their job. Tending to students' emotional needs and delivering fun and engaging science education that meets NGSS standards is difficult work and it requires time to build those skills. That training can't fully happen with drastically reduced hours and less opportunities for meaningful mentorship.

Additionally, I am worried about adding five more interns without providing proper housing. When I was an intern, I did not recommend the internship to my peers because of how far below my standards the housing was. I am curious where the five new interns will live when there is already insufficient housing for eleven interns.

I am also disappointed by the lack of transparency this decision was made with. The structure of the program is complex and has been carefully crafted over decades. To expect staff to work unpaid hours redesigning the entire program is disrespectful to their time and to what they have put so much of themselves into building. In the future, it would be in everyone's best interest to consult the people who know this program best before making drastic changes to it.

I hope that the county can one day provide interns with real benefits rather than cutting corners just to avoid compensating their workers at the level that they deserve.

Sincerely,

Mimi Lucking

Naturalist Intern 2023-2024

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board,

I am writing to express my concerns about the recent changes to the internship at San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE). I worked at SMOE for two years, first as an intern and then as a Village Leader and mentor, over 10 years ago. SMOE was the most supportive and well-run organization I have ever worked for. The structures put in place to help interns grow their skills as educators are exceptionally well-designed. The program's focus on building community with students who are visiting and connecting to place and nature is made possible by the deep intentionality of the intern program and the systems that have been designed, iterated, and honed over years of operation.

My concerns lie in hearing that two very large changes were made to the program without any consultation with the SMOE senior staff. The 30-hour-a-week cap on work hours for interns will significantly impact their ability to build meaningful relationships with students during their time in the program, which is essential to students feeling comfortable and engaged during learning experiences on site. Hiring 5 additional interns and imposing a cap on work hours is a massive shift to the programming, one that will require changing systems and practices that have been thoughtfully developed over *decades*. Making this change so soon before the beginning of the 2025-2026 program does not leave time for the systems and practices to be shifted thoughtfully. I am concerned that the quality of SMOE's programming— both for interns, who are being supported as they learn to teach and engage youth, and for the students— will drop in quality as a result.

I have gone on to work at other outdoor science programs, and to work at the Lawrence Hall of Science at UC Berkeley, where I have designed and worked with hundreds of outdoor education programs from across the country. SMOE's strengths as an intern education program lie in thoughtfully designed and consistently implemented schedules and systems. In the future, I hope the SMCOE Board engages senior staff from San Mateo Outdoor Education in decision making about the program, and listens to the requests of SMOE staff, who hold significant expertise and knowledge about the running of their program.

Thank you,
Emilie Lygren

SMOE Intern, 2011-2012
Village Leader, 2013-2014
Curriculum Developer, Lawrence Hall of Science

Sarah Ludwig
322 Hanover Ave, Apt 511
Oakland, CA 94606
sarah.k.ludwig@gmail.com
828-222-3322
August 9th, 2025

Nancy McGee
San Mateo County Superintendent of Schools
San Mateo County Office of Education
101 Twin Dolphin Drive
Redwood City, CA 94065

Re: Support for Preserving the Full SMOE Internship Program

Dear Superintendent McGee,

I am writing as a proud alumna of the SMOE outdoor education internship program (2015–2016 school year) to express my deep concern over the recent decision to limit SMOE interns to 30 hours per week. This change undermines the very heart of what makes the program so exceptional: its immersive, full-time nature.

When I arrived at SMOE, I was stepping into a world where learning happened in the redwoods, along the coastline, and under the open sky. The program was not just a job — it was a way of life. Living and working alongside fellow interns and staff, leading hands-on environmental lessons, and guiding students through overnight outdoor experiences created a depth of learning and connection that simply cannot be condensed into 30 hours a week.

This immersive year shaped me in profound ways. It taught me how to build trust with students quickly, how to adapt lessons to real-world conditions, and how to foster curiosity and resilience in young people. More than that, it inspired me to dedicate my life to education. Today, as a 5th grade teacher in Oakland, the skills, values, and passion I gained at SMOE continue to guide my work in and out of the classroom.

To cut hours in order to avoid providing benefits not only diminishes the interns' experience, it risks weakening the very qualities that make SMOE a transformative force for both educators and students. Outdoor education thrives on presence, consistency, and relationship-building — all of which require a full-time commitment and full support from the county.

I urge you to reverse this decision, provide interns with the benefits they deserve, and preserve the integrity of this life-changing outdoor education program. The investment will pay dividends for generations of students and educators alike.

Sincerely,



Sarah "Salamander" Ludwig
2015–2016 SMOE Intern
5th Grade ELA Teacher, Education for Change Public Schools

August 12, 2025

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the recent changes to the outdoor education internship program. I have served the students of San Mateo County for 12 years as a Naturalist and have gone through the internship program at San Mateo Outdoor Education. Through thoughtful, intentional and meaningful design, the internship has been the gold standard in environmental education throughout the entire country. Over many decades, our program has been carefully planned and developed to give interns leadership skills, to build autonomy, create community, learn best practices in teaching, problem solving, conflict resolution, group management, collaboration, communication and readiness for what to do next beyond the internship.

I believe that the changes made by bringing in 5 additional interns will have many negative effects on the quality of the internship. It requires a lot of hard work by the senior staff to provide what I have outlined above. These changes were made on the false premise that the law requires that interns can only work 30 hours/week. I have not seen any evidence of this. Also, the decision to make such a drastic change in the program was a unilateral decision without the consultation of the practitioners or an understanding of the program. In my opinion this is an example of failed leadership. Furthermore, a change such as this should be carefully thought out and developed over time not imposed a few months before the start of the program. This decision has created another problem, that of housing. Throughout the years we have worked continually with the YMCA to provide adequate staff housing. We had finally reached some agreements that showed progress. Now, unfortunately the housing situation has once again been compromised and the quality diminished.

The classified staff of SMOE have given an unimaginable amount of time, love and consideration to how this program should run. Being cut out of and not considered for how these changes are implemented will gravely affect and lower the quality of the entire program for many years to come. The senior staff should be involved in suggesting alternatives and providing details along with adequate time to put changes into place. The outdoor ed program has positively touched thousands of lives including, students, high school cabin leaders, teachers and staff. I don't doubt that it will always do so but my hope is that it will continue to provide the highest quality program that it is famously known to do.

The legacy of one of the most beloved institutions in San Mateo County is in your hands. Please make the right choice and restore our program to what it should be.

Sincerely,

Neil E. McBride
Intern 2013-2014
Naturalist 2014-Present

August 12th, 2025

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board,

I'm writing to express my deep concern with the changes being made to the outdoor education intern program. I look back to my intern year at outdoor ed as one of the best, most eye opening and inspiring years of my life. I think of it that fondly because of the people that made it possible and the work that I put into it. Every hour spent with my own group of students on the trails, every minute creating community with my peers and every second spent laughing or crying was absolutely worth it. It has set me up to be a successful professional in my current field of work and I disagree with what's happening to it now.

The addition of 5 more interns and a reduction of their hours would mean the outdoor education program would lose so much of what made it worth it for me. We talk a lot about "creating magic" with the students that come through the program and I believe that this magic is ultimately what stays with them, even far beyond their educational journey at Camp Jones Gulch. It's what the students go back as cabin leaders and eventually as staff for and the cycle continues. Staff are able to create magic with students and elicit a sense of wonder and stewardship when they are with their students more often, if they are not, there's a disconnect.

I believe that changes this drastic should be made collaboratively with the people who are on site working, seeing how those changes could impact them. I would like to suggest for the current senior staff in the outdoor education program to be involved in the process of finding alternatives. I deeply care for this intern program and still recommend it to anyone interested in this kind of work, it's truly the best in the state, if not, the country. I would hate to see the quality diminish because of changes made so hastily.

Sincerely,
Miguel Maciel
Naturalist 2022-23

August 12, 2025

San Mateo County Office of Education

101 Twin Dolphin Drive Redwood City, CA 94065

To the San Mateo County Office of Education,

I am writing to you not only as a community member, but as someone whose life has been profoundly shaped by San Mateo Outdoor Education. I have experienced this program from three unique perspectives. First as a wide-eyed 5th grade student, then as a cabin leader guiding students on their own journeys, and then as a naturalist, helping the next generation discover the magic and importance of our natural world. At each stage, I have seen firsthand how this program changes lives.

San Mateo Outdoor Education is more than just a camp. It is a bridge that connects people to each other, to themselves, and to nature. In a time where green space access is not equally distributed, this program offers an irreplaceable opportunity for students, especially for communities of color, to step into the forest and truly belong there. For some, it's the first time they've heard the rush of a creek, smelled the earth after rain, or looked up to see a sky unbroken by buildings. For all, it's an experience that stays with them for life.

This program fosters community in a way that few others can. Students arrive as strangers and leave as problem-solvers and friends. They learn resilience, empathy, curiosity, and stewardship. Not from textbooks, but from the living, breathing classroom of the forest. These are lessons that ripple far beyond one week; they shape how young people see the world and their place in it.

Any changes that weaken or shrink this program would be a loss that ripples through generations. Altering its mission risks taking away the very thing that makes it so impactful: the immersive, hands-on, life-changing connection to the natural world. I have watched students return home with a new spark in their eyes, ready to share their experiences and take pride in protecting the planet. That spark is not easily ignited elsewhere.

Please understand: this program is not just an outdoor school, it is a promise to our youth that they matter, that they belong in nature, and that their voices and actions can shape the future. We owe it to them, and to the health of our communities, to preserve and strengthen San Mateo Outdoor Education. From the student who first discovered a redwood tree, to the cabin leader who learned the value of mentorship, to the naturalist who now teaches others to see the world differently, I am all these people. And I am proof of the life-changing impact of this program.

I urge you: protect San Mateo Outdoor Education. Keep it whole. Keep it strong. For every child who has yet to feel the forest floor beneath their feet please, do not let this legacy be weakened.

Sincerely,

Raymond "Midnight" Herrera

Dear Ms. Magee,

My name is Belle, and I am writing this letter in response to the recent changes made to the San Mateo Outdoor Education intern program, specifically the decision to limit interns to 30 hours a week. I completed the internship last year, and I want to express how important and impactful this program is in its current form, as well as how significantly I believe these changes will harm its effectiveness.

I came to SMOE with a background in ecology and experience working with kids, and I left as an eager and passionate outdoor educator. The opportunity to lead trail groups throughout the year gave me the repetition needed to develop strong teaching and planning skills. Under the proposed changes, future interns will not receive the same level of experience. Before I came to SMOE, I had never written a lesson plan. But through the weekly professional development sessions and the chance to practice new teaching skills on trail, I gained the confidence to write 5E lesson plans aligned with the California NGSS. I know that San Mateo County wants confident, well-prepared educators leading this essential program and that level of preparation is only possible through the current structure, which allows for repetition and consistent time spent teaching on trail.

Through this program, I was able to make a meaningful impact on hundreds of students. Being with the same group from Monday to Friday allowed me to form the kind of trusting relationships that foster growth and confidence in my students. That continuity is essential. I remember a specific week when I had a student with physical limitations while hiking. Over the course of the week, I was able to build a relationship with this student, earning their trust and helping them gain confidence. That connection allowed me to adapt my hikes and activities so the student could fully participate in every aspect of the program. Without the time to build these kinds of relationships and understand students' individual needs, their experience will be negatively impacted.

I can recall countless other times when I supported a student through homesickness or personal challenges over the course of a week. The result was often a more confident, resilient child who felt seen and supported by an adult who had taken the time to know them. That kind of outcome simply won't be possible with a 30-hour cap that interrupts the consistency needed to build those bonds.

I believe the San Mateo County Office of Education aims to make decisions that protect and enhance the value of this program. However, this particular change will prevent incoming interns from gaining the full range of skills and meaningful experiences the program is known for.

It's also important to acknowledge the impact on the senior staff, who work tirelessly to run SMOE. I hope that any reconsideration of this change will involve consulting them as the experts on how the program functions day to day.

I wasn't able to access a program like this as a child, and I don't want current or future students in San Mateo County to miss out on something so powerful and transformative.

Please reconsider this decision, and work with staff to find a solution that preserves the integrity and value of San Mateo Outdoor Education.

Sincerely,

Belle Carbeck

SMOE Intern (2024-2025)

August 12, 2025

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the recent changes to the outdoor education internship program. Having been an intern myself from 2022 to 2023, I have experienced the powerful impact that this program has on every child that spends a week at SMOE. This program was built to serve the children of our community. The recent changes made without consultation with the staff or a true understanding of the program will severely impact the quality of the intern program, and in turn, its ability to serve.

After my internship year ended, I was deeply inspired to continue bringing outdoor education to public schools. Last year, I helped to build a K-5 farm to school program inspired by the SMOE curriculum for a rural public school in Gunnison, CO. This year I will be working in a K-1 classroom in Bolton, Vermont as a teacher and the lead of the outdoor education program for the entire school. Everything I have done since my intern year has been inspired by the passion and dedication of the educators that I have met through SMOE.

I believe that the changes made by bringing in 5 additional interns and cutting intern hours from 40 to 30 hours a week will severely impact the quality of the intern program. With this change, senior staff will be unable to fully prepare and train the interns. With 16 interns rather than 11, senior staff will have to work unreasonable hours to cover for this change.

It is already immensely difficult for the senior staff to prepare an entire crew of interns before the students arrive on the first day and to support them every single day. Many of the interns from my year at SMOE had no prior experience with this type of work and even those of us that had were heavily challenged by this internship. It was only through a complete and thorough staff training and the one-on-one connections I was able to make with senior staff that allowed me to feel prepared and supported as I took on the responsibilities of this internship.

The SMOE program is built on a small, cohesive group of interns and the senior staff that mentor them. The reason that we were able to serve the students so well, is because first and foremost we had a strong bond between the entire staff and the interns. The addition of interns will deteriorate this type of tight-knit community. The reason that we were able to serve the students so well is because our intern crew was thoroughly trained and given continuous professional development opportunities. The cutting of intern hours will not allow for the interns to be prepared. I hope that you recognize the difficulty of the work that is serving children every day. The interns that come to SMOE deserve to be supported and deserve to be compensated fairly for the work that they do. Everyone at SMOE deserves to be paid their worth.

Sincerely,

Sonya Barchugova
Naturalist Intern 2022-2023

Dear Nancy Magee,

My name is Ben Crooke. I interned at San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE), during the 2022-2023 season. I am writing to express my concerns regarding the recent changes to the outdoor education internship program. To share a little about myself, and why this program means so much to me, I first need to share that I was bullied throughout elementary school. I then had the privilege of enrolling at a different middle and high school, which completely transformed my life in the best way possible. Ultimately, it was not the whole seven years at these new schools which changed my life. It was a series of what I call, "singular moments". Moments of learning, fun, play, belonging, positivity, silence, vulnerability, wonder, community, curiosity, and love for others and nature. From my experience, SMOE staff provides these same experiences for students in the most meaningful ways I have ever seen, especially in a post-COVID world where students struggle even more with social-emotional learning.

While interning at SMOE, I learned and quickly became empowered to create my own "singular moments" for students, like those that I benefitted from ever since I was a kid. This had a profound impact on me. I now look back at my SMOE internship as the year I started to flourish as an educator. My ability to create my own "singular moments" for students would not have been possible without the amazing trainings and professional development opportunities offered by SMOE staff. As an intern, SMOE taught me leadership skills, how to build autonomy, create community, learn best practices in teaching, problem solve, conflict resolution, group management, collaboration, and communication.

One of the main reasons I thrived as a teacher during my SMOE intern year was because I had my own trail group for the entire week, almost every single week of the school year. Thus, I saw my direct impact on my students throughout each week. For example, I could see which teaching techniques worked well in getting students more involved, and the ones that did not. Often, there were students that would have a "lightbulb" moment on Thursday, or even Friday at the very end of the week, where all the sudden, they would change their attitude, or try something new and lean into the learning, silliness, or game being played with the group. It was the best feeling in the world to see a student have their own "singular moment", and I learned how to do that at SMOE. No where else, have I found more meaningful work than when I interned at SMOE. None of what I listed above would have been possible without the support from senior staff, and time that I was given each week to keep improving as an educator.

I believe that the changes made by bringing in 5 additional interns will have a negative effect on the quality of the SMOE internship. Not providing interns with their own trail group each week, loss of professional development opportunities, and the inability to fully train and prepare staff, will take a lot of the "singular moments" or what I call magic, away from the program, including both the staff and more importantly the students. We unfortunately live in a world, where environmental education and climate awareness are at risk of being lost forever. We live in a world where learning how to respect all people, is at risk of being lost forever, at the cost of greed. SMOE is why I'm writing this letter to you, where I'm reminded of that infamous Lorax quote. "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." I am embodying what SMOE taught me. If you stand for something, go out and protect it. I encourage SMCOE to collaboratively approach future changes at SMOE with a thorough understanding of the program and the program needs. The senior staff should be involved in suggesting alternatives and providing details along with adequate time to put changes into place. I ask that you please take into consideration all of what I have written above. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Ben Crooke
Naturalist 2022-2023

Hello Nancy Magee,

My name is Lilly Lakritz and I am a former SMOE intern. I am writing to express my sadness over the change in structure of the SMOE intern program. While I understand that budget cuts have made it challenging to continue the intern program in its original format, I encourage you to consider the educational and social emotional impacts of the decision you are making in addition to the monetary component. Education reform is frequently driven by budgeting because money is the most real limiting factor, however I truly believe that reducing the intern program to 30 hours a week will have complex and hard to foresee effects that may ultimately cost the district more money, and at the very least will decrease the quality of the programming offered. The intern program in its current form is the model for residential outdoor education across the west coast and there is a reason for that. While it is not a perfect program, it does develop high quality educators and provide meaningful programming for the entire public school county system. In a country with a severely underfunded and ineffectual education system, producing educators and meaningful educational experiences cannot be undervalued. As I am sure you have been made aware, increasing the number of interns (and in turn decreasing the hours worked by individual interns) will have multiple impacts on the way SMOE is structured. With increased interns, "trail groups" will no longer be stable sources of community for students throughout the week and student-educator relationships will become less impactful. In addition, it will place a disproportionate burden on existing full time SMOE staff to train and develop the increased intern pool. Decreasing intern hours will make professional development significantly harder, and impact people's ability to "clock" the necessary time to be an effective educator. Lastly, the SMOE internship is already inaccessible because of its location and time commitment, decreasing intern pay will only increase its inaccessibility. Please consider that while this programmatic change will benefit the school district monetarily in the short run, it is also seriously changing the quality and impact of the outdoor education program being provided. It is very special that San Mateo County offers all of its students an opportunity to access the outdoors and learn outside of a traditional classroom. Please support this program and the work that it does.

Best,
Lilly

Dear Superintendent Nancy McGee,

My name is Miriam “Mantle” Urrutia, and I have been part of the San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE) community since the 2022–2023 school year. My first introduction to Outdoor Education came as a recent college graduate when I came for my internship. When I first stepped into this role, I had a basic understanding of my job and its impact, but I never imagined how big an effect it would have on my personal and professional growth! The experiences I had with my intern cohort and with the students led me to return time and time again. From returning as a substitute in 2024 to completing my first year as a Village Leader, I was able to grow and learn from the hard work and intention that the senior staff put into their roles when I was an intern.

During my first weeks of training as an intern in 2022, I was in a constant state of growth. I was always experiencing and learning something new from my peers, the job itself, and the staff. Growing up in Riverside, I never had the opportunity to attend sleep-away camp or Outdoor Ed, so coming here to live, work, and learn was completely new to me. In fact, at the start of my internship, I wasn't sure I would succeed in completing my year. But in those first three weeks, the staff devoted endless time building trust, fostering community, and providing hands-on and intentional training. I saw all the hard work they were doing, and their passion shone brightly. I felt it, and my intern cohort felt it too. We quickly understood the potential of the program, in ourselves, and we saw how valuable the program was for the students, and we understood our “why”, our purpose. They set the stepping stone for us and helped us grow. That combination of support, reassurance, and time to learn made me feel competent, inspired, and capable. Without it, I don't know if my experience would have been the same.

I am writing to express my deep concern about the recent decision to cut intern hours from 40 to 30 hours per week. This change will limit opportunities for professional and personal growth, hinder the ability of interns to fully develop their skills, and ultimately affect the experience of the 5th and 6th-grade students who attend our program. Throughout the school year, Naturalists dedicate themselves to being present and consistent so they can create a meaningful learning experience for every student. When a Naturalist is absent for as little as a day due to illness, a doctor's appointment, or other needs, Naturalists often feel that the time away disrupted the flow of their group or the progress of an individual student. I know this

feeling well, and I understand how essential consistency is to both student learning and intern development.

This past year, I worked closely with a very homesick student who was also anxious, scared, and often tried to avoid activities. I spent the week reaching compromises with her, offering constant encouragement, and setting daily goals. Over time, we built a strong rapport—she knew that, among all the students at Outdoor Ed, there was someone who understood strategies that worked for her and someone who truly had her back. Gradually, she became more comfortable with me and the rest of her cabin. On Thursday night, SMOE held its evening program, Campfire, where students share the skits they've been preparing with their cabin mates in front of the whole camp. I wasn't present that evening because of my schedule, but I overheard her name come over the radio. Naturalists talked about how my student didn't want to perform her skit anymore. By the end of the call, it was settled that she was going to pass and sit out the performance. I got on the radio and insisted that the Naturalist try again, because she needed a lot of encouragement and reassurance. In the end, she got up on stage and did her skit. When I checked in on her later that night, she felt very proud of herself.

It is moments like these that show us that consistency in Naturalists and their schedule is important to students who come to outdoor ed. I fear that with the new proposed intern hours, Naturalists will not be able to provide the same amount of time and attention that certain students need at Outdoor Ed. There is going to be a shift in the connection and security students feel with the Naturalist. I do acknowledge that past schedules were not in compliance with labor laws, but reducing the number of hours they work to mitigate compensation or benefits will harm the success of our program. Interns will have 10 fewer hours a week with students. To an outsider, these 10 hours might not mean a lot, but when you only have 5 days, sometimes 4 days to work with a student, this is precious time.

It is crucial for SMCOE to look for other ways to work within laws to find another solution than the one you have presented to us. You have made a final solution that does not make sense for our program. You have asked us to restructure our program completely and find a different solution a month before piloting our program again. Creating a lot of stress to senior staff. Already with 11 interns, senior staff is putting in a lot of hours, mentoring, guiding, inspiring, teaching, building community and so much more. Now, with the addition of 5 more interns, my workload is going to drastically increase and I am nervous about how that will affect

me, the work ethic, my mental health, and my overall work life balance. I signed my intent-to-return form months before these changes were even mentioned, let alone made. It feels greatly unfair to me that the job I intended to come back to is not the one I will be doing this year.

SMOE is more than just a job or a program, it has been a place where people grow, connect, and become leaders. It's a space that shapes lives. And I want future interns, students, and staff to be able to have the same transformative experience that I did. I always hear how much the county office appreciates our work and how beneficial it is for students, so please take the time to really think about how these course of action have shifted our program into something completely new. Please take the time to hear our voices, stories, and solutions. Let's work together!

Sincerely,

Miriam Urrutia-Zendejas

SMOE Intern 2022-2023

Naturalist Sub Feb -May 2024

Village Leader 2024- Present .

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board,

I am writing to express my deep concern and sadness for the decisions that have been made for the SMOE internship. I am not just a current staff member, but a product of the program. I attended SMOE as a 5th grader, volunteered 12 weeks as a Cabin Leader in high school, completed an internship during a gap year in college, returned as an intern after finishing my degree, and returned as a full time staff member in 2024. All of my favorite parts of myself are skills and traits that I developed at SMOE, and in the darkest moments of my life I have turned to SMOE to keep me stable. Because of my internship at SMOE I have become a person that I am proud to be, and it pains me to think of this opportunity being taken away from future interns.

I can see why this decision was made. Without having spent a whole week on trail as an intern, it is easy to assume that this is a reasonable solution to the problem that our internship faces. Namely, working 40 hours a week without receiving benefits does not comply with the labor laws for San Mateo County. However, this mandate has been passed down to us as if there were no other solutions. I understand that giving our interns benefits is a huge ask, but as someone with experience as a Student, as a Cabin Leader, and as a Naturalist, I can promise you that the quality, safety, educational impact, and social emotional impact of our program will suffer greatly for all three groups if our internship is cut by 25%. I believe that our interns deserve benefits. I believe that our program's impact warrants this support from the county. I believe that San Mateo Outdoor Education staff members deserve to be given the space to advocate for our program when decisions are being made for us without us in the room.

I was a homesick student. The only reason that I was able to make it through the week was the close relationship that I established with my Naturalist, who was an intern at the time. Her nature name was Fluke, and she made me feel so safe. I have visceral memories of pushing myself to try new things and step out of my comfort zone on the night hike. It was on the Xerogeanes trail, and I wanted to go home so badly right before my solo hike that I hid behind a tree and cried. Fluke noticed, found me, and gave me the pep talk that I needed to do something that to this day I am proud of. That experience changed me forever. Without the bond I had with Fluke, I would have gone home Thursday evening, when I broke down in tears on the Stellar's Jay porch. She had the rapport and experience to build me up, and set me on a path for success. Because of my week at SMOE as a 5th grader I discovered a love for nature and science, I found my voice and individuality, and I developed a life long dedication to being myself. Under this new model, the Naturalists will have an entire day's worth of time away from their students. This not only makes the program less impactful, but less safe. Without the ability to establish rapport with their students, they cannot successfully care for their emotional wellbeing, much less ensure that every student can access learning opportunities. When you take a child away from their family and support systems and place them in cabins in the woods with strangers, they rely on the adults around them to know them enough to advocate for them and care for them. We cannot accomplish this when their naturalist has to be rotated out of the schedule to keep them under 30 hours.

My week at SMOE as a 5th grader was impactful, but my experience as a Cabin Leader is what truly saved my life. As a young queer kid that was bad at school and sports, it was really hard to feel good at anything. At SMOE I found my calling. I also found naturalists that believed in me enough to advocate for me and take me under their wing. In my time as a Cabin Leader I learned that I was someone worth believing in. I also learned lessons and gained skills that I have continually used in my professional career, both at SMOE and elsewhere. One such naturalist was an intern named Summit. Summit checked in with me throughout the week to give counsel and guidance, and eventually wrote an entire lesson plan for me to lead. Afterwards, she took the time to set me aside and give me feedback on my public speaking, group management, and teaching style that I still use today. More importantly, she built me up and encouraged me in a way that I had never felt before. In another week, I had a naturalist named Colibri. I told Colibri about some of the stuff going on at home for me, and she developed an entire Social Emotional curriculum for me to experience that paralleled the students' experience. It was tailored for me and was one flash of light in an otherwise dark time for me. My experiences were special and impactful, but not at all unique. I have seen this happen countless times from the other side, and it is one of the most meaningful parts of the program. It also is something that will be made impossible if the internship is reduced to 30 hours. We simply cannot dedicate the time and effort required to do the life changing work that we are known for when we are being asked to work a fourth less than we normally do.

The work that our interns do is incredible. It takes skill, nuance, and curriculum development. We provide a quality experience not because our interns read from a script, but because we take the time to build a foundation of philosophical and pedagogical theory that guides our practices throughout the week. On top of that, as a program that doesn't just teach, but houses our students, there is an incredible amount of logistics training and memorization that is required to complete a week. As we scramble to restructure our staff training weeks (that have been developed over the past 60 years) to fit a 30 hour model, we will be forced to cut all of the parts of training that make this program what it is. For the first time in the program's history, we will be sending our interns out on trail without the aforementioned foundation. Again, this not only will make our program less impactful, but less safe. I know how it feels to teach for 6 hours on trail for the first time with no teaching experience. It is terrifying. I don't know how it feels to teach for 6 hours on trail with 25% less training than I had. I want to work for a program that I am proud of. This requires a comprehensive and thorough staff training that is impossible to provide in the time that we have been given.

I have lived in San Mateo County my whole life. SMOE is not just a program, but a cultural staple of life on the Peninsula. It is so rare that the entire population of a county has a common experience that they can relate on, and it is even more rare that this experience is of a quality that matches SMOE's. I have worked in the Californian Outdoor Ed industry for the last 6 years, and I laude SMOE's quality not because of loyalty or naivete, but because of experience. The program we provide is unique, and I have seen its impact first hand. If you talk to anyone above the age of 12 that went to public school, they can tell you a positive memory of SMOE. If you talk to any 5th grade teacher, they can tell you that SMOE is a crucial and irreplaceable part

of the San Mateo 5th grader experience. If you talk to any former intern, they will tell you of the myriad of ways that SMOE changed their life. It is unfathomable that the creators of these experiences (the interns) have not been paid their worth for the past 60 years, but it is even more unfathomable that rather than pay our interns benefits we are being forced to sacrifice the experience of the students, cabin leaders, and interns. I believe in this program. If you do too, I strongly urge you to advocate for it. We have something special here, and it makes me proud to be from San Mateo County. We are worth fighting for.

Thank you,

Owen Mylod Yee (twig)

Village Leader at San Mateo Outdoor Ed

Former student of: Orion Elementary School, Kennedy Middle School, Sequoia High School

08/12/2025

Dear Nancy McGee,

I am writing as someone who has been deeply impacted by the San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE) internship program. I am concerned and disappointed regarding the recent decision by the county office to impose a hard cap of 30 hours per week on all interns. This unprecedented change was made without consulting any staff or those who know the program best, and it threatens to fundamentally undermine what makes SMOE such a transformative experience for students and staff alike.

SMOE is not just an internship, it's a way of life. The "magic" of the program comes from the time, dedication, and deep connection interns and staff invest. Limiting work hours to 30 per week simply does not allow the interns to fully engage, grow, or contribute in the way that SMOE has always encouraged. This reduction in hours forces cuts to essential staff training, creating an ill-prepared intern cohort. To make matters worse, the county office's attempt to avoid providing benefits by cutting hours has resulted in hiring more interns, which exacerbates an already challenging housing situation on site and weakens the ability to build community amongst the staff. In addition, reducing intern hours adds to the workload of senior staff due to the nature of having to support more (ill-prepared) interns, as well as attempting to bridge the gaps with staff transitioning in and out. This change also reduces consistency for students, leading to a less cohesive, impactful program.

This change is heartbreaking. It will impact the quality of the experience for both students and interns, diminishing the legacy and spirit that have been cultivated over many years. Students will miss out on the rich, hands-on learning and mentoring that require a full-time commitment from interns. At the same time, interns are being undervalued, their livelihoods and professional growth jeopardized for cost-saving reasons.

I urge you and the San Mateo County Office of Education to reconsider this decision. Please revoke the 30-hour cap and provide appropriate benefits to interns. Consult those of us who have lived and breathed SMOE — we understand the value and demands of the program and want to see it thrive, not be watered down. The strength of SMOE comes from its people and their commitment, and it deserves full support.

For the sake of all current and future students and interns who will come through this incredible program, please listen to our voices. Let us preserve the integrity, legacy, and spirit of SMOE rather than letting it be diminished for the sake of short-term savings. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Lizzy 'Lotus' Lyons
Naturalist Intern 2022-2023

Dear Superintendent Nancy McGee and SMOE Board,

I am reaching out to express my concern regarding the proposed changes to the San Mateo Outdoor Education internship program. As a former SMOE intern, I feel especially motivated to urge you all to reconsider the following changes to the program: limiting interns to a 30 hour work week, removing benefits from interns, and adding 5 more interns. I had a life changing 10 months interning at SMOE, and it is my hope that all future interns receive the same transformative experience that I did. However, I believe the changes that I have listed above threaten this from happening.

I believe that changing interns' work week to only 30 hours will not only limit their ability to grow as educators and community members over a full week with outdoor education students but also diminish the once in a lifetime experience that these students receive at SMOE. The arc of a week at outdoor education, from your intro hike to your closing circle, cannot be recreated with multiple naturalist interns. The bond and understanding that a naturalist builds with their students is priceless. Please consider keeping the 40 hour work week for interns.

Offering interns the option to receive benefits is incredibly valuable, not to mention what should be a standard for all organizations. As someone who was made a financial independent at the age of 18, I was relieved to have the option to receive benefits through my work. I would not have felt comfortable working as a naturalist without benefits, and the county offering a streamlined way to receive them was greatly appreciated. I urge you to keep benefits for our interns.

Finally, I am greatly concerned about the proposal of adding 5 more interns to the program. While I believe as many people as possible should participate in the internship, space is limited on site, especially so during Winter storms when buildings' power and other utilities shut off. More is not better. Please keep the internship to 11 interns.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope that we can all work together as a community to keep the magic that has persisted for so many years alive at San Mateo Outdoor Education.

Sincerely,

Gabe "Albatross" Petersen, 2023 - 2024

August 12, 2025

Dear Superintendent Nancy McGee and SMCOE Board,

I am writing to express my concerns and disappointment with the recent decision to change the county's Outdoor Education Internship. The internship at SMOE was completely formative for me in terms of my professional and personal development, seeing that I now work as a teacher in San Francisco. I hadn't had much experience teaching students before SMOE so the internship provided me with robust opportunities and skills to not only be confident in teaching and fostering community, but to excel at it.

As soon as I arrived to SMOE's campus, I felt immediately cared for and planned for as the senior staff was give great attention and care for all interns—something I do not think would be possible if the number of interns were increased. It would diminish the amount of time and attention the senior staff would be able to dedicate to training and growing the interns' knowledge of teaching and the outdoor education program. The program felt incredibly organized, well-thought out, and intentional; I worry with the increase of the number of interns and the decrease of the number of hours, the program is not prepared to give the same intentional and thoughtful growing experience to the new interns.

These changes were also made on the false premise that the law requires that interns can only work 30 hours/week. I have not seen any evidence of this. Additionally, interns work full jobs, thus should be benefitted and rewarded for their work. Instead of decreasing the hours and attending more interns, giving benefits to interns would allow them to comfortably live in California while working a very meaningful but often overlooked job. Also, the decision to make such a drastic change in the program was a unilateral decision without the consultation of the practitioners or an understanding of the program. This is an example of uninformed decision made by leadership. Furthermore, a change such as this should be carefully thought out and developed over time not imposed a few months before the start of the program. It is not fair to the many, many years of thought and practice that have been put into the program by the senior staff to have it disregarded so quickly without any warning or discussion with the senior staff.

SMOE was the beginning of my education journey, for which I will be forever indebted to and grateful for. It is not an exaggeration to say that the outdoor education internship changed my life—as I know it did for many of my friends as well—and taught be so much about how to be a teacher, but also how to be an upstanding, welcoming, and loving community member. The internship structure is incredibly special and changes to the program should be consulted with current staff at SMOE. Thank you for reading.

Sincerely,
Alexandra "Aven" Edwards
Naturalist Intern 2022-2023

Dear SMCOE Board,

I first heard of SMOE from my mom who worked in Special Education in Alameda County for more than 30 years. She had heard from her counterparts in San Mateo County that the program had a wonderful reputation for nurturing explorative learning and giving instructors teaching skills they could build upon. I applied to SMOE because of this story and now I find myself lucky to have played a small part in a program with a remarkable legacy.

As an intern in 2013/2014 I learned how to lead a group, guide students towards learning goals, and how to play my part in promoting a larger mission. I also learned how gratifying it was to show up for students in need and the highs of helping a struggling student overcome. I learned about what I wanted to do with my life as well as discovered more about who I was. I was lucky enough to get rehired as a Village Leader/Lead Instructor where I helped others gain the skills I had gotten. Being a teaching mentor was one of the most gratifying roles I've ever had. I still remember when we went to a SMCOE all staff meeting where we were cheered for what we brought to San Mateo County.

Since then I've gone on to become a community college professor. The foundation of my teaching skills began at SMOE and the education and teaching training that they offer is still top-notch. While the program is unique and distant to most of SMCOE, it touches so many throughout San Mateo County and beyond. I worked with interns that have gone onto become teachers, nurses, scientists, programmers, researchers, school counselors, and so much more. If you were to meet any of them, they would say their time at SMOE helped guide them to where they are now.

Now that I've explained my history at SMOE, I'd like to ask a few questions: why is SMCOE targeting the most vulnerable population (interns) at SMOE? In a Bay Area that is increasingly unaffordable and with consumer costs now projected to rise higher, how are these instructors supposed to make ends meet? Furthermore, why is SMCOE trying to lessen the hours the interns will work to ensure that they will not be eligible for benefits? This compounds the issue of affordability and limits who would even consider who would work at SMOE. If SMCOE is looking to promote a diverse workforce with candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds, this would work against that principle. Lastly, why carry all of these decisions out without consulting SMOE staff? If SMCOE is proud of the impact that SMOE has on students and families within San Mateo County, how can such drastic changes be made without letting the SMOE leadership map out what it will look like? If this is how SMOE will be treated going forward, I don't think that it will be able to adequately deliver its impactful pedagogy to students throughout San Mateo County. It saddens me to think about the future students and interns who won't be given the support they need to thrive and the life altering experiences that will be stolen from them.

SMOE has a stellar reputation. Whether at SMCOE, within the outdoor education community, with the 5th and 6th grade students, with the high school volunteers, with parents, and even with other environmental organizations like CA State Parks. These changes threaten to disrupt the 50 years of culture and unique education that SMOE has been able to deliver. I hope that the board will reconsider these changes and support SMCOE and SMOE opening a dialogue on an alternative future that will promote SMOE maintaining its high standards of education and experiential learning.

Best,
Ben Nelson

To whom it may concern,

I have been a part of the San Mateo Outdoor Education Program since I was a child. First as a 5th grader, then as a high school volunteer, an Intern Naturalist, and then returning last year filling in as a Village Leader. The magic this program brings changes lives, especially those of the interns.

I don't claim the program is perfect or that the hours are intense. In fact, as an intern I helped lead conversation for change on the internship program as so many of us were getting burnt out. We made spreadsheets, documents full of suggestions and possible solutions such as creating a new night program that chaperone teachers lead. None of our thoughts, this years, last years, or any of the previous were taken into account. Instead, although with the best intentions, leaders who are not working in the program made the decisions for us, largely uninformed by the Naturalist community.

I don't disagree that change is necessary, but I object to the avenue that has been chosen. The hours and intensity of the internship are heavy, however I would argue that the sheer amount of time you get with the kids as an intern and the intensity of the work is essential to the growth, impact, and experience of an intern. It is also a quality of the job you are told of and prepare for before hiring.

I started work as an intern at SMOE because I wanted to make a difference, as so many others there do. I spent every hour I could with my students. Hundreds over just one year. Through that avenue of dedication I saw with my own eyes the impact our built connection made. Halfway through the year I got pneumonia and had to stay home for two weeks. When I returned I was on the mend for the next few weeks, but not fully better. This meant I had to step away from trail or meals or nighttime activities from time to time. Those weeks were my least favorite. I felt I wasn't accomplishing what I came to do and the evidence was right in front of me. Even by missing half a day of trail the kids interacted with me differently. There weren't so many hugs in our goodbyes, there wasn't much advice requested, conflicts went amiss, things I would've noticed slipped between the cracks, authority was harder to hold, the themes of my lessons became fractured, and my Cabin Leaders didn't have a through line of leadership from me. I wasn't the mentor I came to be and it wasn't for a lack of enthusiasm, only from my absence.

The gift of these weeks is that you are set up as a Naturalist to make immense change in the lives you touch. This is many kids and even high schoolers first time learning in a way that can be tailor made for them and their success. When you spend a week focusing your energy of twelve kids and a volunteer, you become a mentor, a confidant, a leader. You become the face of belief to those kids. That is taken away when you shuffle who they are with throughout their limited days, lessen their interactions, The kids deserve consistency and so do the staff. It's what makes the program run. The freedom to teach and connect 100% and the work ethic built through trial and error, coming back to the job every week and getting better each time. Such growth is impossible when the job is spliced up into weeks of meals, weeks of night activities,

and weeks of day hikes. I'm aware I'm simplifying, but change is made in the minds of young people with consistency and presence.

As an intern I knew it, and as a Village Leader mentoring new interns I became sure of it, every intern walks away from their nine months changed for the better. Their leadership skills, ability to thrive under pressure, intuitive conflict resolution ability, work ethic, community values, commitment, performance and enthusiasm, people skills, public speaking, lesson planning ability, scientific knowledge, collaboration skills, musical ability, scheduling and disciplining and overall positivity, and so much more. It all grows immeasurably in those nine *consistent* months. These are *practiced* skills. Practiced not just one thing over and over for a week or two, but every week, everything over and over. This way you become a well rounded leader and those skills are ingrained deeper than any other job offers.

The Intern Naturalist position is one each of us chose. Of course it can be improved, as can everything. However, limiting their ability to be a consistent mentor to their students and Cabin Leaders while splicing up and clustering their responsibilities in the way that is planned is *not* the solution. It will take away from the promise of impact, the primary appeal and motivation for most people to not only take the job, but put their all into it.

I am confident both that the committee presenting this change wants the best for the program and all who reside in it. I am also confident that together we can find a better solution.

I stand with my Naturalist community on this matter. Feel free to reach out if I can aid or clarify any more in the discussion.

Sincerely,

Katie "Eucalyptus" de Geus

katelyndegeus@gmail.com

Dear Nancy Magee and SMCOE Board

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the recent changes to the outdoor education internship program. I was an Intern Naturalist from 2014-2015 and it was a life changing and beautiful experience. My concern is that adding additional interns to this program, especially just weeks before program begins, will dramatically change the heart of the program. The SMCOE program is unique and truly a model for the rest of the state's outdoor programs. I believe these changes will diminish the quality of the program. I am also deeply concerned about the lack of support for full time staff members, and the issue of housing this brings. I urge you to hear the concerns of the full time staff, and reevaluate these changes.

Thank you,

Jackie Latham McBride

Intern 2014-2015

Dear Nancy McGee,

7/31/2025

My name is Delaney Ronay, my nature name is Bee. I would like to provide you with some of my experience working at the San Mateo Outdoor Education Program. I was an intern for the 2023/2024 school year at SMOE alongside 10 other naturalists; Ladybug (Lily), Albatross (Gabe), Eucalyptus(Katie), Equinox(Eleanor), Canyon(Kelly), Sculpin(Cy), Possum(Calder), Storm(Loran), Dune(Jen) and Salamander(Mimi). There were eleven of us, just like the last 60 years of this program.

My love for the earth and outdoors stems from where I grew up and the people I was inspired by from a young age. I was raised in a tiny village right outside Yosemite National Park. My field trips were lead by outdoor educators and I was given a safe space to explore the earth. As I have entered my adulthood, I have the same desire to return that to the next generation. My passion in this life has been to create a safe environment for children to explore the outdoors and understand how to treat the earth with kindness just how I learned to when I was a kid.

When I arrived to the redwood forest in late August of 2023, I was overwhelmed with gratitude and excitement for the program in general and the experiences I would have moving forward. I met the most incredible group of people that I quickly realised would be lifelong friends. I was eager to teach and be around students who wanted to learn. The nerves were intertwined, yet were put to rest, as soon as training began and my friendships with the fellow interns started to form and blossom. The small group of people allowed us all to trust one another and form a community within the teaching environment. I love each and every friendship and wouldn't have wanted to spend my waking days with any more than the 10 other people I was with. (Including the four VLs and senior staff).

The interns have such a special and sacred position. They are responsible for forming a safe and welcoming space and for inviting the students to participate and act as stewards to the land. Naturalists are also responsible for making sure each student feels comfortable forming bonds and friendships within their cabin groups. Within the education realm, it is important to provide consistency. Fortunately, with this program, although it is jam-packed with fun and exciting activities, the naturalists that are assigned specific groups of students each week provide the feeling that the students have a "teacher" at outdoor ed. Ensuring the students have someone who is consistent within this exciting and new experiences. The activities are extremely intentional; they allow the students to see what the next days will hold and the lessons they will learn. I felt it was exciting and important for the students to see the naturalists day-in and day-out as the week passed. Although it feels exhausting, the bond and trust that is formed between the naturalists and the students is far more important. The support they feel from their naturalists for simply showing up, as they do, every day is extremely valuable.

Students who have the privilege to attend outdoor ed at the fifth grade level are very vulnerable and majority of the time nervous to participate. The interns' job is to make sure their presence is helpful and encouraging to their assigned students. Most of the interns are strategically trained to understand and create the space to make the students feel cared for and excited about learning with their time at the program. Big trees day, garden day and beach day are crucial parts to the outdoor ed experience. Along with these full day activities, the night time activities; earth dance, ocean odyssey and the night hike are extremely affective activities where the students can recognise each naturalist individually that are included in within the program. The staff's connection to one another is radiant as soon as they step off the bus until they have to leave. The energy encourages the students to feel fearless as well as interested in the topics that are being taught. One of the most special parts of outdoor ed is getting to take the students on the night hike. It allows the students to rely on their community of peers and forces them to

trust their personal naturalists. The tuck ins are also a crucial part of the entire program that impact the strength of relationships between the cabin and the naturalists. Unfortunately, having the students intertwined with multiple naturalists allows for the chaos of the program to continue to feel like chaos. Regardless of if there are helping hands to step in to relieve the staff, it breaks the bond and consistency of the naturalist and boundaries that were created. Personally, I find having the same naturalist with the same group of students for the entire week extremely beneficial.

For the Village Leaders, it is an extremely exhausting position where they are constantly the “safety net” for the interns and extended staff regardless of if their time is technically on or off. They have a huge impact on the flow of the program and how each piece of the puzzle is necessary. Although the program requires every human to be “on” majority of the school year, there is not necessarily room to change or alter the steam-rolling-ship because throughout history, it has always worked.

My time at SMOE was joyful and incredibly memorable. I felt so privileged to teach the most incredible materials outdoors and work alongside the most incredible staff. I learned about myself and how to set the best example for the students while working with other naturalists who have different experiences than mine. We got to bounce ideas off of one another and rely on each other when times felt uneasy because we formed a strong community. My desire to bond with my students was prioritised every week to ensure they could trust me, feel confident that I would show up the next day for them, and continue to teach them about the environment. Taking the time away from the students providing “extra hands” would be detrimental to the flow of the program and its ability to feel seamless. The priority of students time with consistency and trust should be put at the forefront of this program and should not be sacrificed for more naturalists on staff to just “sub in”. This program is incredibly magical and I think it would be diluted if there were too many people who may or may not be trained properly under such short notice leading into this 2025/2026 school year. I hope this year will be fulfilling and consistent with the naturalists and students.

Please feel free to contact me regarding my experience further if needed.

Thank you for your time. I wish every staff member the best leading into this school year.

Kindly,

Delaney Ronay

Subject: Comment for August 20 board meeting
Date: Tuesday, August 19, 2025 at 3:27:40 PM Pacific Daylight Time
From: Amelia Rosenman
To: Information SMCOE

Dear members of the Board,

It has come to my attention that some significant decisions regarding the Outdoor Education program's staffing and internship planning have recently been made with short notice and without in depth consultation with that program's own leadership.

I was on staff at SMOE for 5 years and know firsthand what a tremendous asset the program is to the county's elementary students and high-school cabin leaders. The SMOE internship is also widely regarded throughout the state of California as one of the most transformational and effective training programs for new educators. I have a deep level of respect for the people who steward the SMOE program and urge you to collaborate with them fully as you reconsider these decisions and any others that greatly affect their operations.

Sincerely,
Amelia Rosenman
SMOE staff 2009-2014

Subject: Comment for August 20 Board Meeting For Item #2
Date: Wednesday, August 20, 2025 at 4:57:20 PM Pacific Daylight Time
From: Mary Kristina Waite
To: Information SMCOE

Good Evening,

I am sending an email to encourage the SMCOE board to provide benefits for the San Mateo Outdoor Education (SMOE) interns. Recently, there was an attempt to increase the number of interns who could work at SMOE, despite already facing a serious housing shortage on-site. It would also have had a severe impact on the layout of the program. The team at SMOE was misled about the reason for this action - to deny benefits to the staff.

Please consider righting this wrong. The internship was incredibly powerful for me personally, and influenced my career in a positive way. It would only be improved with the proper benefits provided to the hard-working staff.

Thank you for taking this into consideration.

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Cheers,

Mary Kristina (MK) K-Waite
Pronouns: *She/Her/Hers*
Email: mkristina.waite@gmail.com
Phone: (831) 747-4388