



# Wildlife Champions Evaluation Report 2024 - 2025

Understanding Community Impacts:  
Perspectives from Parents/Caregivers and  
School Officials



This report was produced in February 2025 by Beez Kneez Creative for Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium.

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Additional thanks to all participating students, their parents/guardians, classroom teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators at Arlington Elementary School and Lister Elementary School.

## Background & Purpose

Wildlife Champions is a long term community partnership between Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium (PDZA), Metro Parks Tacoma, and two elementary schools in the Tacoma Public School District. Wildlife Champions students learn and practice empathy for wildlife, while becoming stewards of their school, local park, and neighborhood. Teachers and PDZA educators collaboratively build hands-on lessons and outdoor experiences for K-5 students using inquiry-based science concepts.<sup>1</sup>

Arlington Elementary is now in its 7th year of the program; Lister Elementary is in its 2nd year. In addition to assessing student outcomes, past evaluation of Wildlife Champions has invited input from the classroom teachers and school administrators. Ongoing feedback from these partners is necessary for PDZA to understand what sorts of training and resources the schools require in order to sustain Wildlife Champions in future years.

This evaluation component explored ways the program touches non-teaching staff (principals/administrators, curriculum coaches, and potential teachers), as well as the parents/guardians of students who are engaged in Wildlife Champions. The team was specifically interested in understanding the following impacts on the community:

- How have the Wildlife Champions instructors brought empathy more broadly into the school/community?
- If given a choice of schools, are parents more likely to choose one that offers the Wildlife Champions program; if so, why?
- When applying for jobs in Tacoma Public Schools, are teachers looking to work for a school that incorporates Wildlife Champions; if so, why?

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<sup>1</sup> Description taken from Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium website.

# Part 1: Parent/Caregiver Perspectives

## Methods

The evaluation plan originally suggested conducting focus groups with parents/caregivers whose students are enrolled in Arlington and Lister Elementary Schools. When scheduling challenges presented themselves early in the school year, we opted instead to convert those focus groups questions into an online survey, with the idea of recruiting a subset of parents to participate in focus groups later in the year.

A survey consisting of five close-ended and one open-ended question was designed to examine parent/caregivers' familiarity with the Wildlife Champions program and whether it influenced their decision to enroll their students in a particular school. The survey was prepared using Microsoft Forms. Dissemination of the survey was paired with existing scheduled events at each school which included an opportunity for PDZA staff to introduce themselves and invite attendees to take the online survey using iPads provided in the meeting space. Following the school meetings, the survey remained open for four weeks between mid November and mid December 2024.

Respondents spent an average of 14 minutes completing the survey. Responses were confidential. After submitting their responses, participants were given the option to provide an email address to indicate interest in sharing more about their student's experience with Wildlife Champions. Twelve respondents provided an email address, but only one responded to repeated requests to schedule a follow-up discussion. Given the lack of interest, no focus group for parents was held; however, the responses on the survey provided sufficient detail for this evaluation report.

# Participants

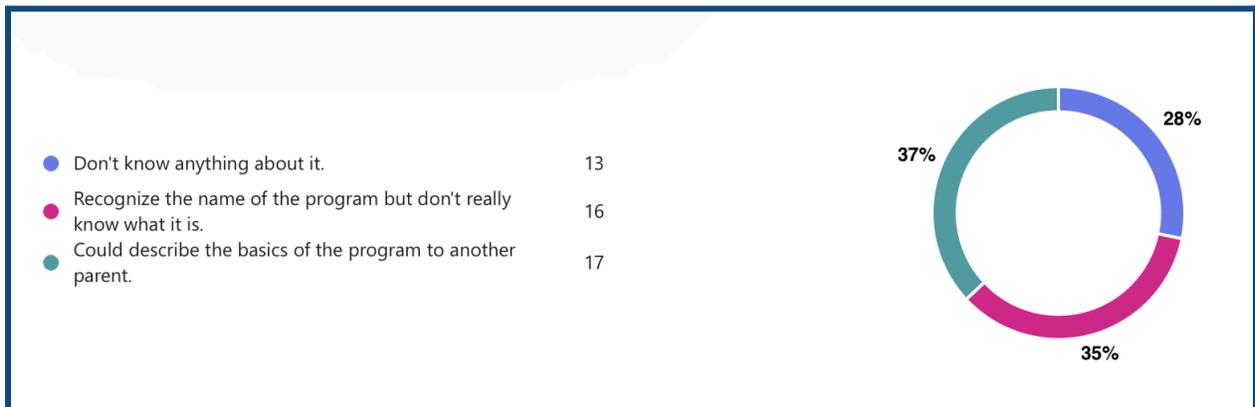
Responses were received from a total of 46 parents/caregivers, including 22 from Arlington Elementary and 24 from Lister Elementary (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Number of survey respondents from each participating school.

# What is your familiarity with the Wildlife Champions program?

Overall (n = 46), 37% of parents/caregivers indicate they could describe the basics of the Wildlife Champions program to another parent, 35% simply recognized the name of the program, and 28% admitted they did not know anything about it (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Responses from both schools to the question: What is your familiarity with the Wildlife Champions program?

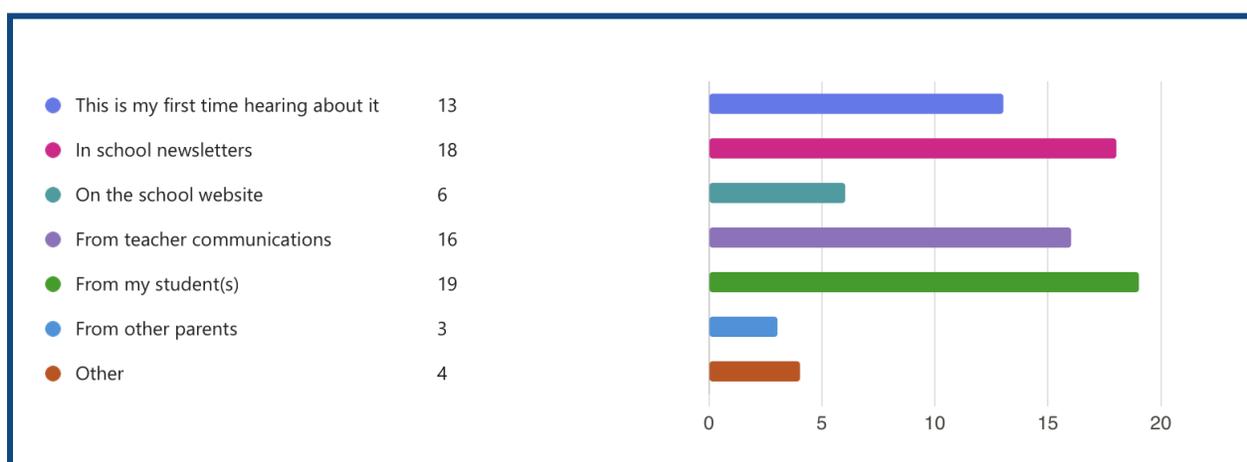
Parents/caregivers with students at Arlington Elementary, which has been hosting the Wildlife Champions for seven years, are considerably more familiar with Wildlife Champions than those at Lister Elementary, where the program was initiated two years ago.

Respondents with students at Arlington (n = 22) who indicated they could describe the basics of the program to another parent composed 41% of the total; another 41% recognized the name of the program; and only 18% admitted not knowing anything about the program.

Respondents with students at Lister (n = 24) who indicated they could describe the basics of the program to another parent composed 33% of the total; 29% recognized the name of the program; and 38% - the largest percentage from this group - admitted not knowing anything about the program.

## How have you heard about Wildlife Champions?

Overall (n = 46), parents/caregivers were most likely to have heard about Wildlife Champions from their students, school newsletters, and teacher communications. They were far less likely to hear about the program from the school website or other parents. (See Figure 3.) Consistent with the previous question, 28% of parents/caregivers had not previously heard about Wildlife Champions through any communications.



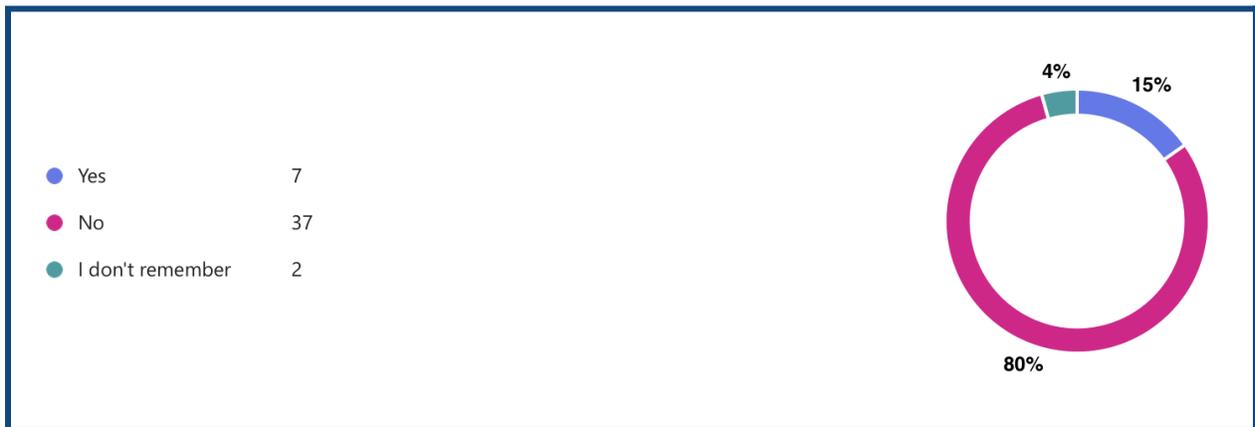
**Figure 3.** Responses from both schools to the question: How have you heard about Wildlife Champions program? Participants could choose more than one item.

Parents/caregivers with students at Arlington Elementary were more likely than those at Lister Elementary to have heard about the program through any communication channels. Among Arlington respondents (n = 22), 55% listed multiple sources of information about the program, compared with 33% at Lister (n = 24).

**Based on this input from parents/caregivers, school teachers and administrators should continue to communicate frequently about the program through school newsletters and teacher communications that are sent home. If there are opportunities for students to take home materials showcasing their work during the program, they should be clearly labeled as a Wildlife Champions product. Boosting the program’s social media presence on each school’s website may also draw attention from parents/caregivers interested in seeing their students featured.**

## Have you ever volunteered (this year or in past years) to chaperone a Wildlife Champions field trip?

Overall (n = 44), only 15% of parents/caregivers recalled volunteering to chaperone a field trip (see Figure 4). Two respondents skipped this question.



**Figure 4.** Responses from both schools to the question: Have you ever volunteered (this year or in past years) to chaperone a Wildlife Champions field trip?

Given the longer-running program, Arlington Elementary parents/caregivers were more likely to have chaperoned a field trip than those at Lister Elementary. Among Arlington respondents, 23% had volunteered to chaperone, compared with 8% from Lister.

**While not all parents/caregivers are able to volunteer time to chaperone field trips, the invitation to join a park outing should be promoted to all families as an opportunity to engage directly with the students' learning experiences.**

## Was the Wildlife Champions program a factor in your decision to enroll your student(s) in this school?

Overall (n = 46), 22% of respondents acknowledged that the Wildlife Champions program factored into their decision to enroll their students at the particular school (see Figure 5).

Parents/caregivers with students at Lister Elementary (n = 24) were more likely than those at Arlington Elementary (n = 22) to provide a positive response to this question, with 25% positive from Lister and 18% from Arlington - despite the lower rate of program awareness by Lister parents/caregivers.



**Figure 5.** Responses from both schools to the question: Was the Wildlife Champions program a factor in your decision to enroll your student(s) in this school?

This finding may indicate that word about the value of the program is spreading throughout the community. PDZA and TPS should continue to promote Wildlife Champions as a value-added component of the science curriculum at all participating schools.

## How would you describe the Wildlife Champions program in your own words?

Overall (n = 46), 46% provided a valid response to this question. Parents/caregivers with students at Arlington Elementary (n = 22) were more capable than those at Lister Elementary (n = 24) of providing a description of the program, with 59% valid responses from Arlington and 33% from Lister. Examples of valid responses are provided below.

Common components used to describe the program included animals/wildlife, field trip/park, outdoors, and stewards/taking care of. The term “empathy” was included in four responses. Four participants recognized in their descriptions that the program is a partnership with the Zoo (see Table 1).

| Descriptor                       | Number of Mentions |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Animals or Wildlife              | 11                 |
| Field Trip or Park               | 7                  |
| Outdoors                         | 6                  |
| Stewardship or Taking care of    | 5                  |
| Empathy                          | 4                  |
| Nature or Environment            | 4                  |
| Partnership with Zoo             | 4                  |
| Hands On or Authentic Experience | 3                  |
| Habitats                         | 2                  |

**Table 1.** Categorized responses from both schools to the question: How would you describe the Wildlife Champions program in your own words?

From Arlington Elementary parents/caregivers:

Staff from the zoo come in and teach compassion for plants and animals. Along with bringing in live animals and taking trips to Oak Tree park.

A PDZA program built in partnership with TPS schools to build empathy in kids towards animals, different environments, and wildlife in general through hands-on lessons and real-life experiences.

An opportunity to connect with nature, a program that focuses on empathy and learning about nature and animals. It's a field trip to the park.

Teaching children the importance of wildlife and preservation

Wildlife teachers from Pt. Defiance lead students in a handful of sessions throughout the year. Students take short field trips to Oak Tree Park to make observations and complete lessons about plants and animals. Students learn about habitats, plant and animal relationships, and how to be good stewards.

Introduces children to animals that live around us and their habitats and how those habitats are important even in the city.

It's a great way to get our kids to understand the importance of understanding and taking care of wildlife and outdoors.

An opportunity for students to get outside and experience and learn nature in a new way, sponsored by Metro Parks (Zoo).

From Lister Elementary parents/caregivers:

I believe it involves learning through a more hands on approach by being outdoors and working with Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium.

It helps kids learn more about wildlife and become closer to nature.

I appreciate that the program teaches empathy for living things and respect for ecosystems.

The kids take a walk at Swan Creek with their class and explore outside things.

A more hands on and interactive approach to not just science but all subjects that is desperately needed in our schools.

Seven participants provided a generic positive description, such as “It’s a great program.” One parent/caregiver from Lister Elementary seemed to misunderstand that the program is currently part of the school-wide curriculum, writing “Wish I could afford to send my kiddos.”

**Among the respondents who offered a description of the program, many hit on key aspects of the Wildlife Champions curriculum. Given that over half of respondents were not able to articulate specific components of the program, PDZA should increase communication with parents about the purpose of Wildlife Champions, the types of activities students are engaging in, and the value of the program as part of the science curriculum.**

## Additional Comments

Some participants used the last question to provide additional commentary on the program.

My kids love it!

I’m guessing she likes it, being she loves animals.

I just met the staff; they are amazing and I'm so excited they are part of the education of my child.

It seems like a great opportunity for the kids and everyone involved in the program

My kids say they love it.

I feel my child has really gained an interest in animals and helping them. She has been playing animal hospital so much over the last year and a half and I think this program has something to do with it.

# Part 2: School Officials' Perspectives

## Methods

This portion of the evaluation was originally conceived as a single online focus group session involving officials from both schools participating in the Wildlife Champions program. One person was not available to do the online session and instead participated in a separate telephone call. Everyone was asked the same set of questions regarding their perspectives on the impact Wildlife Champions has on the community. .

## Participants

Invitations to participate in this evaluation component were sent to the principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches at Arlington and Lister Elementary Schools, a total of five individuals. Due to scheduling constraints, only three school officials were able to participate in the discussions. Two representatives came from Lister Elementary School and one from Arlington Elementary School.

## How would you describe WC to another administrator at a different school?

All of the participating school officials could easily describe the Wildlife Champions program in their own words, and all led with the concept of a partnership with Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium. Descriptive phrases that overlapped with those used by parents/caregivers include: empathy, partnership, field trip, and outdoors. Words unique to the descriptions provided by school officials were science and social-emotional learning. (See Table 2.)

| Descriptor                 | Number of Mentions |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Partnership with Zoo       | 3                  |
| Empathy                    | 2                  |
| Science*                   | 2                  |
| Field Trip or Park         | 1                  |
| Outdoors                   | 1                  |
| Social-Emotional Learning* | 1                  |

**Table 2.** Categorized responses from school officials to the question: How would you describe Wildlife Champions to another administrator at a different school? Items with an asterisk indicate phrases that were not used by parents/caregivers in response to a similar question.

## As a science curriculum, what makes Wildlife Champions stand out?

Two of the three school officials mentioned outdoor learning as part of what makes Wildlife Champions stand out as a science curriculum. Two mentioned reinforcing classroom learning. High student engagement was also mentioned twice. Other phrases mentioned only a single time but which accurately capture the program goals included application to real world experiences and the idea of building confidence in students to do science/be scientists. (See Table 3.)

| Descriptor                                      | Number of Mentions |
|---|--------------------|
| Outdoor learning                                | 3                  |
| Reinforcing classroom learning                  | 2                  |
| High student engagement                         | 2                  |
| Application to real world                       | 1                  |
| Efficacy around doing science/begin a scientist | 1                  |

**Table 3.** Categorized responses from school officials to the question: As a science curriculum, what makes Wildlife Champions stand out?

# If Wildlife Champions were not part of the science curriculum, what do you think would be lost?

Two of the three school officials felt that without the Wildlife Champions program, real life application would be lost from their school’s science curriculum. In particular, one respondent emphasized the relevance to the community of Tacoma. Two people mentioned empathy as a component of the curriculum, with one of them noting that the focus on empathy reinforces themes in the required *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum package that teaches about Indigenous peoples. The other suggested that Wildlife Champions’ focus on empathy fills a gap that is missing from the regular Social-Emotional Learning curriculum. Another comment highlighted that Wildlife Champions increases students’ excitement and enthusiasm for learning science. (See Table 4.)

| Descriptor                      | Number of Mentions |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Application to real life        | 2                  |
| Empathy messages                | 2                  |
| Enthusiasm for learning science | 1                  |

**Table 4.** Categorized responses from school officials to the question: If Wildlife Champions were not part of the science curriculum, what do you think would be lost?

# How do you notice students applying Wildlife Champions learnings in or out of the classroom?

Each of the three school officials provided a unique perspective on how they noticed students applying Wildlife Champions learnings. One person noted that students are extremely **protective of any stray wildlife** that may find its way into the school building, like ants or spiders. Another person talked about the connection students feel to their class mascots and the **pride they exhibit in relation to these animal icons**. The last response focused more on how students interact with the PDZA instructors. This person acknowledged the value of having **additional trusted adults** in the building.

## Can you give an example of a time when a classroom teacher invoked Wildlife Champions principles or learnings outside of the program?

Each of the three school officials was able to provide examples of times when a classroom teacher invoked Wildlife Champions principles or learnings. One person explained that the English Language Arts curriculum has found many relevant connections to Wildlife Champions, and teachers are now sometimes **using science sources for reading materials** to meet ELA standards. Another described the **rich discussions and questions** that emerge when students are learning about animals and nature, whether it is part of the Wildlife Champions program or otherwise. The last response mentioned teachers who build on the work of the PDZA instructors, for instance with second graders **growing plants** in their classrooms.

This discussion led to school officials' acknowledgement that anything extra - even when it has clear positive benefits for students - creates additional burden on teachers.

## When interviewing new teachers, do you tell them about Wildlife Champions?

All three school officials reported telling potential new hires about the Wildlife Champions program. It was noted that Lister Elementary hired many new teachers (1/3rd of the total staff) for the '24-'25 school year. Those interviews included a specific question about Wildlife Champions, to ensure that new hires fully understood the school's commitment to the program and that they would be expected to actively participate in it.

## When hiring new teachers, do you consider how they'll do with the Wildlife Champions curriculum?

All of the three school officials do consider Wildlife Champions to some extent when selecting new hires. One of them specifically noted that teachers must express a willingness to take students outdoors in any weather. Another focused on the requirement to co-teach with the

PDZA instructors, and took into consideration an applicant's comfort with this model. They acknowledged it can be difficult to have someone else delivering instruction in one's classroom, and identified co-planning and collaboration as important elements to success.

## Have you ever heard of a family choosing to enroll their child at your school because of Wildlife Champions?

None of the three school officials were aware of any family choosing to enroll in their school because of the Wildlife Champions program. Neither school is in an area where families have much choice in enrollment options because there is no bussing available and therefore most students live within walking distance of their chosen school.

**Although the sample size for Part 2 of this evaluation is small, the perspectives from the three participating individuals provide important insights for the PDZA team working on Wildlife Champions. There is clear appreciation for and respect of the partnership between Tacoma Public Schools and PDZA. Administrators at the participating schools seem committed to continuing this partnership and could be utilized as advocates for bringing more schools into the program. They are able to point to specific ways that Wildlife Champions reinforces science and SEL standards, as well as direct benefits that the PDZA instructors bring to students. Their selection of teaching staff considers how new hires will fit into the Wildlife Champions co-teaching model and the program could be used to entice quality teachers to apply to work in participating schools. While school officials were unaware of families choosing enrollment based on the program, evidence does exist from the parents/guardians that this is the case, which suggests further community support for Wildlife Champions.**