Students who attend Outdoor School at Westwind near Lincoln City learn something pretty unique: the bunks they sleep in were designed and built by high school students. Over the past four years, a special partnership has developed between Westwind and Sabin-Schellenberg Professional Technical Center in the North Clackamas School District. Angela Wright, the building construction career technical educator at Sabin-Schellenberg, leads her students through the design/build process for a multi-year remodel project updating the cabins at Westwind.

Along the way, students are learning how to use tools, carpentry skills, teamwork, safety, and collaboration. More experienced students propose and pitch design ideas, create tool and material lists, establish and assign crews to tasks, and provide vertical peer-to-peer mentoring. Industry professionals also work side-by-side with students, providing a rich career experience that for some students is just the spark they need to determine their career path. For many students, Angela reports, they discover that “omigosh, this is my vibe, this is what I want to be doing. I wouldn’t rather be anywhere else!”

At school, students do all the preparation needed to make the most of their time at Westwind. The building projects themselves take place over long weekends at the camp, which provides an experience that, in Angela’s words, “is like camp, but a construction camp. It’s all the hanging out and having fun and community building, plus we are getting a job done.” The students work their tails off and have fun doing it. Students will stay up until 11 p.m. to finish a task, and if they don’t get it done they will get up early to finish before breakfast. And at the end of the weekend, when they are exhausted, they ask, “When’s the next trip?!?”

For Westwind, approaching a cabin remodel project this way aligns with their values and goals for youth development and community engagement. Andy Lindberg, Executive Director of Westwind and Friends of Outdoor School board member puts it this way: “The relationship just shows another track of experiential education and another way for young people to build a connection to place in the outdoors, which is why Outdoor School is so impactful. The authenticity matches well with the concept of Outdoor School.”

The learning for students is real, Andy says. “As the work continues, we have contractor/client meetings with the students. It’s authentic. They are getting practice as design/builders, hearing the goals of the client, and reviewing past work to identify improvements to the process and materials.” On some trips culinary students from the school attend as well, providing food service for the entire crew. One construction student so impressed Andy that when he graduated he was hired for a full-time facilities job at Westwind.

Angela has put in a lot of extra effort for this program, even getting a special bus driver’s license to drive the students to the coast. But it’s all worth it, she says, because of what it does for students. And the partnership goes both ways. “Westwind is super special. They have a need, and they could have hired a company to finish it in a season. The fact that they are willing to go at the school pace, the student-centered pace, says a lot about them, their mission, and what a great collaboration we’ve built. Our values are aligned.”

Could this partnership be replicated elsewhere? Angela says that staff at other schools call her and ask her how she does it. “I tell them to reach out to a camp! It’s a lot of work, but totally worth it!”