

My name is Erin Scheffler and I have been a part of the Northcenter and Lincoln Square community for over 25 years. I recently received my Master of Public Health in Community Health Science, and have had the pleasure of working for the Chicago Department of Public Health, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Over the years, I have come to understand how impactful educational programs are for connecting to our community and to ourselves. This is particularly true during grade school. I was about nine years old when my summer camp had all us campers assist with planting native wetland plants in the Chicago River at Berteau and Rockwell Ave. This was the first time I was introduced to Pete Leki. Pete taught us about all the plants and animals that call the river home, and how us nine year olds were about to become ecological stewards by assisting with this planting.

I remember marveling at the little plants in my hands, being careful not to hurt the roots while we lowered them into the riverbank. I felt like I was doing something deeply important. And I was! I was welcoming these plants into their new home, which directly protected against bank erosion, and created safe havens for river wildlife in and out of the water. Little did I know, my mind and heart were also being opened up. I was learning about respect and reverence, gentleness and self-awareness, community and interconnection.

I urge you not to cut any funding for the critically necessary programs you currently offer. Waters School is known across Cook County as the gold standard for elementary school-based and community-based environmental programming. Every dollar you use to fund environmental education is a direct investment into our entire community's future. The global climate crisis is already here, and we need to be bolstering nature education for Every. Single. Child.

Young students and community members will remember sprinkling the compost they helped to make from food scraps months before into their family's garden plot. They will remember all the ways our communities are part of the greater Chicagoland ecosystem and how everything and everyone are interconnected. Decades later, they will remember cradling baby plants in their hands and the day they became environmental stewards.

Thank you for your time and consideration.