

THE COOPER CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING

2025-2029

Strategic Plan



Dear Friends & Supporters,

On behalf of the Cooper Center staff, volunteers, and the children, educators, and community members we serve, thank you for your support of our important work. I'm very proud of the collaborative work that has gone into this Strategic Plan. What you have in front of you is the distilled version. If you would like to explore any of these goals more deeply, please reach out to us, and we'll be happy to share the action steps and details that guide our work.

The development of this plan has taken over ten months and has involved our staff, advisory board and its committees, classroom teachers, donors, and partners from Tucson Unified School District, the University of Arizona, and the communities we serve. Our process has also inspired us to reconsider our use of data in decision-making and to broaden the application of key performance indicators in evaluating the impact of our strategic goals.

Our success in achieving the goals outlined in this plan depends on you. Your investment in our work, whether it takes the form of time, energy, expertise, making connections, contributing financially, or something else, is essential in our efforts to grow and thrive. With your help, we have an opportunity to bring our programs to a larger audience, continuing to inspire each learner through deep and meaningful connections with the wonders of our Sonoran Desert.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. We truly love the work we're doing and the community that we're a part of, and we're excited for what's to come over the next few years and beyond.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Colin Waite".

Colin Waite
Cooper Center Director



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Our Mission

We connect children and learners of all ages with the Sonoran Desert through immersive, education-based, outdoor adventures. We build deep relationships with nature in a welcoming and inclusive environment, fostering a love and understanding of the natural world.

Cooper History

The Cooper Center for Environmental Learning—affectionately known as Camp Cooper—was founded in 1964 on ten acres of the Sonoran Desert along the Tucson mountains. The site was acquired by Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) administrator Herbert Cooper, whose vision and contribution gave the center its name.

In the mid-1960s, the introduction of Title I funding created opportunities to expand outdoor learning, and a group of TUSD educators recognized the site's incredible potential for nature-based education. What began as a rural outdoor classroom quickly evolved into a unique space for students to explore science, ecology and environmental stewardship in a hands-on setting.

Today, the Cooper Center is operated through a lasting partnership between TUSD and the University of Arizona's College of Education. In September 2019, the TUSD Governing Board and the Arizona Board of Regents approved a 20-year agreement, securing its partnership through 2039 and reaffirming a shared commitment to environmental education.

Over the past six decades, Camp Cooper has welcomed more than 150,000 children to experience the beauty and wonder of the Sonoran Desert. It has grown into a vital and inspiring educational center, connecting generations of people to the desert and empowering them to care for the world around them.



Executive Summary

The Cooper Center for Environmental Learning is proud to present a strategic plan that outlines our vision and priorities for the next four years. Rooted in our mission to inspire children and learners of all ages to love and care for the natural world, this plan builds upon over 60 years of environmental education in the Sonoran Desert. Developed through collaborative input from staff, partners, educators, donors and our broader community, the plan provides a clear roadmap for growth, sustainability and deeper impact across all areas of our work.

Our key priorities include enhancing and expanding program offerings through thoughtful curriculum updates and the utilization of robust evaluation tools to measure impact. We aim to strengthen our community engagement by growing our volunteer and advisory board programs, increasing our presence at local events and fostering meaningful partnerships with the University of Arizona and TUSD. Facility improvements are a major focus, with sustainable renovations of sleeping cabins underway and plans for new gathering spaces, interpretive exhibits and accessibility upgrades that support year-round, inclusive learning.

Marketing and communications efforts will evolve to better tell our story, improve outreach to families and educators and support revenue-generating initiatives like facility rentals and fundraising campaigns. We are also investing in staff development—expanding our team, offering career pathways and enhancing professional support for teachers through mentorship and collaborative workshops.

With this plan, Cooper is paving a path forward that honors our legacy and embraces innovation. We're growing not only in size and scope, but in our ability to empower the next generation of environmental stewards. Through this shared vision, we invite our community to join and support us in creating a more connected, sustainable future.



Program Development

We are committed to providing dynamic and engaging educational experiences that grow alongside our students. Through intentional curriculum design, evaluation, and long-term planning, we aim to improve and expand our offerings across all grade levels. Our goal is to ensure every student builds a deeper connection with the Sonoran Desert.

Accomplishments

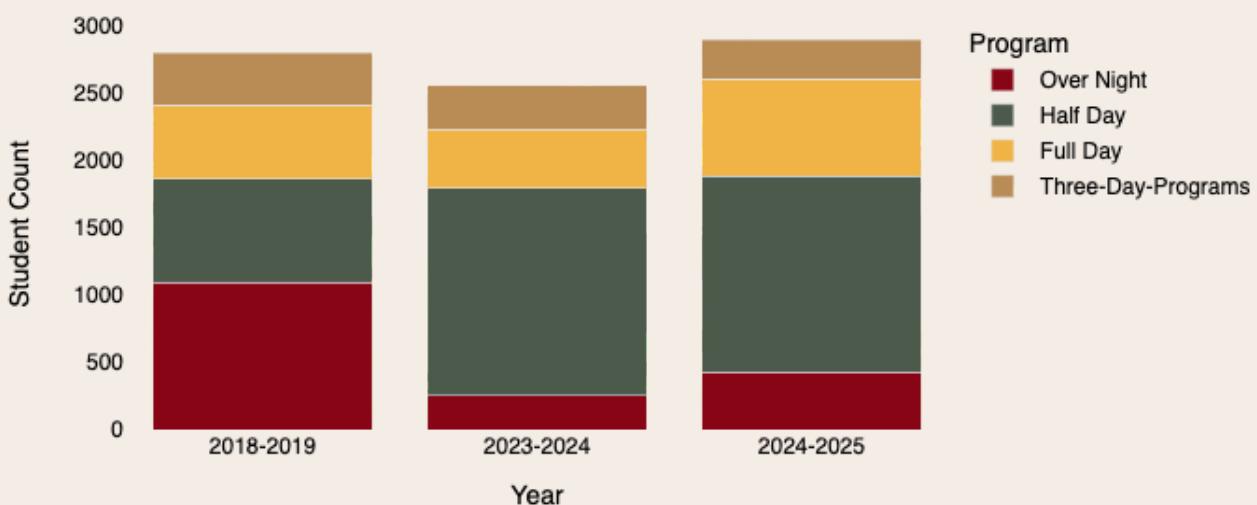
2024–2025

- **Revised 5th Grade Program:** Updated the 5th grade curriculum to improve student engagement, integrate hands-on learning and align with current academic standards.
- **Evaluation Pilots:** Implemented pre- and post-program evaluations for 4th–8th grade students to begin assessing program impact on knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to the environment and the Sonoran Desert.

“For many of us, Camp Cooper was our only chance to experience a camp environment. Those two nights spent cooking meals together, gathering around the fire and exploring the desert created lasting memories. I’m deeply grateful for my time at Camp Cooper and thrilled to see how much it has grown into an even stronger educational experience over the years.”

- *Former Cooper Camper*

Student Count by Year and Program



Key Goals

2025–2026

- **Middle School Program Launch:** Finalize and promote a nature journaling-based curriculum that's been developed and piloted over the previous two years.
- **Curriculum Updates for 3rd and 4th Grades:** Use feedback from staff, teachers and student evaluations to refine existing lessons and activities for greater relevance and inclusivity.

- **High School Engagement:** Collaborate with high school teachers and TUSD curriculum staff through focus groups to inform the development of new high school programming.
- **Evaluation Continuation:** Continue testing and refining evaluation tools for 4th–8th grades to track student learning and program outcomes.

2026–2027

- **High School Program Pilot:** Launch a pilot version of the high school program and assess its effectiveness through staff observation, student feedback and educator input.
- **Earthkeepers Program Revamp:** Update and improve the Earthkeepers program with updated pre- and post-surveys, culturally responsive curriculum, improved sense of place strategies and stronger long-term follow-up to deepen impact.

2027–2028

- **High School Program Launch:** Fully implement the refined high school program with coordinated marketing and outreach efforts to engage schools across the community.
- **Earthkeepers Continued Revisions:** Expand on prior updates by refining evaluation tools, enhancing instructional practices and increasing student support for lasting understandings, attitudes and behaviors.

“Camp Cooper’s lessons have made a lasting impact on me and my students. By teaching us about the animals, plants, and ecosystems in our neighborhood, it has inspired a deeper care for nature and sustainable living. The students come away more connected to and respectful of the world around them.” - TUSD Teacher

Camp Cooper. Camp Cooper. Camp Cooper.



Facilities & Grounds

Camp Cooper's outdoor spaces and infrastructures are central to our mission of immersive environmental education. We want facilities that support current programming while also reflecting our long-term values of sustainability, accessibility, and community connection. By investing in thoughtful improvements, we will enhance the educational experience for thousands of students while creating a campus that serves as a model of environmental stewardship for Southern Arizona.

2025–2026

- **Complete Student Cabin Renovations:** Finish renovations to Camp Cooper's six sleeping cabins to improve year-round comfort, accessibility and sustainability—featuring energy-efficient insulation, solar-powered systems and modernized design.

What's to Come

2026–2027

- **Finalize Kitchen Renovation Designs:** Complete designs for the new kitchen facility with input from stakeholders, focusing on energy efficiency, accessibility and programmatic alignment.
- **Integrate Interpretive Design into Facilities:** Incorporate inclusive, place-based interpretive design strategies into the renovation and construction of new buildings—ensuring that each space reflects and communicates the cultural, ecological and educational significance of the Sonoran Desert.

2027–2028

- **Finalize Classroom Renovation Designs:** Complete architectural planning for updated classroom facilities, integrating sustainability and flexibility for multiple program uses.

Your support helps us maintain and improve the Cooper Center's facilities so they remain safe, sustainable and inspiring for generations to come. Current projects like our cabin renovations, solar-powered upgrades and accessibility improvements are possible thanks to both public and private funding.

“Camp Cooper has integrated the Sonoran Desert into a safe environment for hands-on engagement for our young learners.” - TUSD Teacher



Exterior Cabin Renovation



Interior Cabin Renovation



Exterior Bathroom Renovation



Classroom Teacher Support

As we grow our programming and deepen our impact, the Cooper Center remains committed to supporting educators through meaningful, accessible and culturally relevant professional development (PD) opportunities. Teachers are key partners in environmental learning, and we aim to provide tools and experiences that enhance their work inside and outside the classroom.

Key Goals

Increase and Diversify Professional Development (PD) Opportunities

Collaborate with local partners—TUSD, surrounding districts, UA, the Tucson Regional Educator Collaborative and other nonprofits—to design and implement a variety of PD offerings. Along with this, leverage existing PD days (e.g., TUSD's Professional Learning Days) to provide onsite and virtual training opportunities.

Offer New Learning Experiences

Widen our scope by creating programs that span across various subjects, including science, literacy, math, art, social studies, health, etc.

Expand Support for Field Trip Planning and Facilitation

Launch a mentorship program pairing Cooper staff, volunteers and experienced educators with newer teachers to help them through every step of a field trip, including planning, execution and follow-up. We plan to work with TUSD and other districts to streamline and simplify field trip approval and logistics processes.

Aspirational Goals

Strengthen University of Arizona Partnerships

Deepen collaboration between the Cooper Center and UA College of Education programs including Elementary Ed, Early Childhood Ed, Indigenous Teacher Education Project, Secondary Ed and others. This engagement will be fostered through course integrations and curriculum alignment.

Build Stronger Classroom Connections for Field Trip Experiences

Develop robust pre- and post-trip activities that reinforce and expand on field-based learning. Along with this, offer virtual follow-up sessions to maintain engagement and deepen learning.

Expand Classroom Visits

Regularly occurring classroom visits from Cooper educators, volunteers and interns to reach more children while also strengthening relationships and support.

Camp Cooper has guided me by deepening my commitment to supporting others in developing a love and connection to nature, the land and its valuable resources. - Former Cooper Employee

Staff Support & Development

At the core of Camp Cooper's success is a passionate and talented team. Over the next four years, we are committed to fostering an internal culture of professional growth, staff sustainability and leadership development. Our strategic vision prioritizes both maintaining a supportive working environment and expanding our team to meet growing programmatic needs.

Key Goals

Establish a Clear Career Track:

Implement structured opportunities for promotion and salary increases based on experience, responsibility, and performance milestones.

Targeted Professional Development:

Offer customized training for staff that supports environmental education, culturally responsive teaching, communications, and program leadership.

Management Planning:

Outline internal staff role projections through 2029 to guide annual budget development and future fundraising efforts.

Aspirational Hires

- **Assistant Director** with a focus on fundraising and strategic partnerships.
- **Rentals Coordinator** to manage increased facility use and community engagement.
- Additional **Education Team** staff to support:
 - Expanded use of the Camp Cooper facility.
 - Growth in virtual education offerings.
 - Enhanced in-school and classroom-based programming.
 - Broadened community events and partnerships at alternate program sites.



Marketing

Camp Cooper's growth and community impact rely on consistent, mission-aligned marketing and communications. Over the next four years, our goals include building a strong brand foundation, elevating visibility within the UA and across Southern Arizona, and expanding our capacity to reach new and diverse audiences.



2025–2026

- **Promote UA Land Grant Mission Connection:** Produce and publish at least three high-quality digital storytelling pieces (e.g., blogs, videos, or social media series) that showcase how Camp Cooper contributes to the University's land grant mission, which focuses on providing practical education and research to improve the lives of Arizonans and beyond.
- **Hire a Part-Time Communications UA Student Intern:** Bring on a part-time intern to support communications efforts under the supervision of the marketing specialist and program coordinator.

2026–2027

- **Increase Awareness Among Field Trip Families:** Distribute bilingual welcome packets to all families of visiting students to improve engagement and accessibility.
- **Expand Community Outreach & Accessibility:** Proactively build partnerships with at least three new community organizations serving underrepresented populations, particularly children with disabilities, and co-develop one pilot program.

2027–2028

- **Promote Facility Rentals After Renovations:** Create and launch bilingual promotional materials highlighting the new sustainable cabins and expanded rental opportunities for events, retreats and workshops.

2028–2029

- **Reach New Audiences:** Conduct an outreach analysis to identify underserved or underrepresented groups, including middle and high school students, families and adults. Based on findings, draft proposals for three new programs by June 2029 that reflect the needs and interests of these communities.

Community Outreach

Camp Cooper thrives through deep connections with our local community, UA, TUSD, and a network of dedicated volunteers and supporters. To expand our reach and impact, we are prioritizing public programming, strengthening board and volunteer infrastructure, and building meaningful partnerships.

Increase Off-Site Participation

Develop an annual outreach calendar that places Cooper at community spaces such as parks, schools and cultural centers—raising visibility while being mindful of staff capacity.

Volunteer Recruitment for Events

Recruit and train community representatives to assist with outreach, event logistics and public engagement, enhancing our presence in off-site spaces and relieving pressure on core staff.

Rental Feasibility Study

Research local rental spaces to get an accurate description of the potential utilization of renting out the Cooper facilities after main construction projects are concluded.

Advisory Board

The Cooper Center advisory board is a dedicated group of volunteers committed to supporting the mission and future of Camp Cooper. By offering their expertise, insights and resources, they help shape the center's growth and impact. We are actively working to build a more inclusive and representative advisory board that reflects the diversity of the communities we serve through our education programs.

Advisory Board Expansion

Increase the number of non-staff Advisory Board members from seven to 12 by the end of the 2025–2026 academic year, strengthening community representation and support.

Committee Growth

Build capacity within our internal, external and governance Committees by increasing membership and clarifying committee roles and objectives.

"It's more important than ever that people get involved in the Cooper Center, either by coming out and providing us with their guidance and wisdom or by investing in Cooper by contributing. Both of my kids went to Camp Cooper and absolutely loved it - we must support programs like this." - Advisory Board Member



University of Arizona Engagement

Student Commitment

Offer meaningful opportunities for UA students through internships, work-study roles, research projects and class collaborations. Engage student clubs, residence halls, Greek Life and Campus Recreation in programming and service opportunities.

Faculty & Staff Collaboration

Explore academic collaborations in research, professional development and course design, particularly with programs like the School of Natural Resources and the College of Education.

Carnegie Sustainability and Community Engagement Initiatives

Align Camp Cooper's programming and outreach with broader UA initiatives, including the Sustainability & Climate Action Plan and Carnegie Foundation Sustainability Classification. Elevate awareness among faculty and departments through targeted outreach.

Research and Evaluation

Identify research possibilities tied to Cooper's mission, including composting, environmental literacy, green building design, teacher preparation/professional development and place-based education. Build awareness across campus for student and faculty research integration.



"I have learned that there are many different ways to approach environmental learning, and I have loved learning the way Cooper Center does it. Many of the kids are experiencing the desert for the first time when coming to Cooper and seeing how connected and engaged they get truly shows how effective the programs and the methods are at the center."

- Former Cooper Intern

Ways to Support the Cooper Center

Financial Support

Your generosity fuels our future and makes our strategic goals more achievable. Whether you're giving \$10 or \$10,000, your investment is essential to our growth and success. Remember, it's all about connecting children and learners of all ages with the wonders of the natural world, inspiring each person to care for our planet and its ecological systems.

You can designate your contribution in many ways. You can fund our amazing staff and programs through a gift to operations, or you can invest in improvements to the Camp Cooper facility with a gift to our capital fund. A donation to the Cooper Center Endowment Fund can help us establish long-term financial sustainability, and Arizona Tax Credit donations provide direct support to schools, covering student fees, school bus transportation and meals. All of these methods of support are crucial to achieving our strategic goals. Don't hesitate to get in touch with the Cooper Center Director for more information or to discuss a potential gift.



Become a friend of Camp Cooper and provide a child with an overnight stay! This \$35 gift will also cover costs, materials and time for our educational staff.

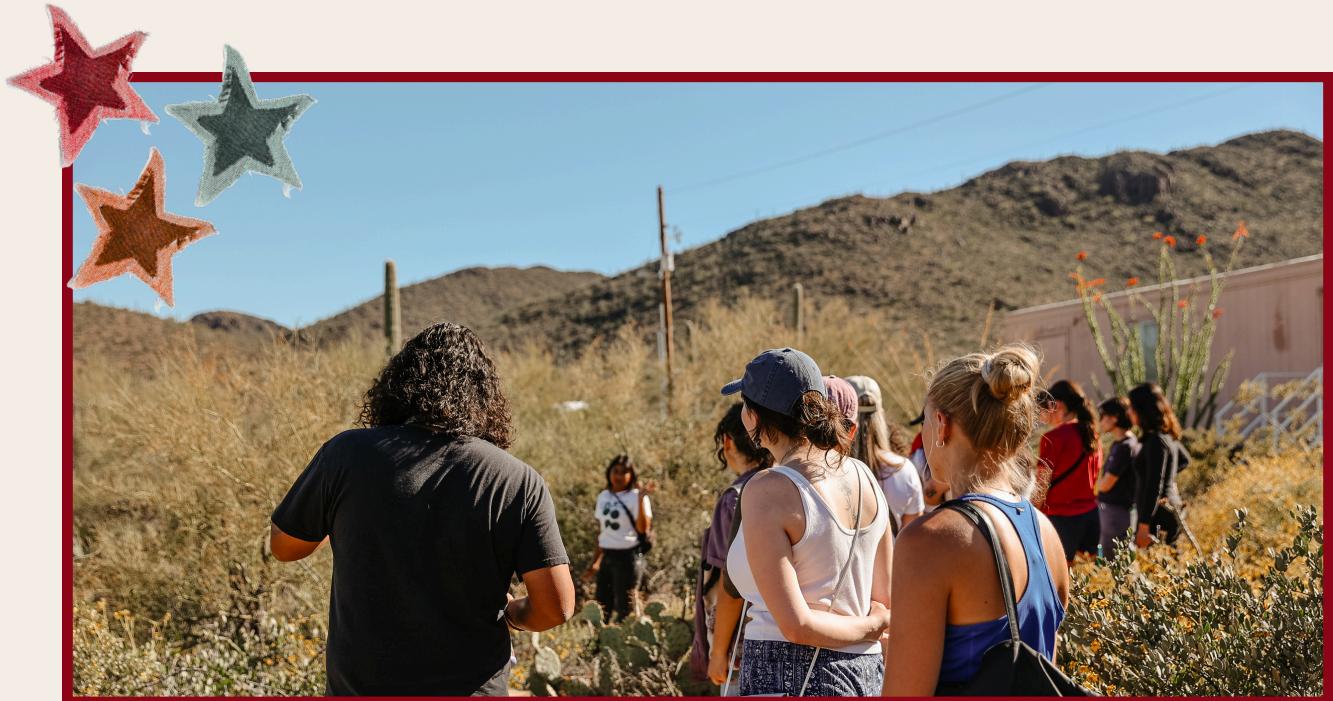


Dive into Earthkeepers, Cooper's immersive 3-day program for 4th and 5th graders! Your contribution fully backs two students' Camp Cooper adventures and earns you the cherished title of a friend of Camp Cooper.



Volunteer Support

There are many opportunities to use your time, expertise and experience to advance Cooper Center's mission in the community. You can join the Cooper Center advisory board or one of its committees, supporting our work in marketing and communications, fundraising, event planning and facilitation, educational programming and evaluation, research, facilities management, community networking and more! You can also volunteer to help us directly with community events and programs, including everything from trail and facility maintenance to tabling opportunities for advocacy and promotion around Southern Arizona.



Appendix

Key Performance Indicators

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are quantifiable metrics that measure an organization's effectiveness in achieving its strategic goals and objectives. They serve as crucial tools for tracking progress, identifying areas for improvement, and making data-driven decisions to drive growth and success. KPIs can apply to various aspects of an organization, such as finance, sales, marketing, and operations, and must be relevant to the specific goals and industry of the organization.

Through our strategic planning process, Cooper Center has identified several KPIs related to our field trip programs that we will use. These KPIs have data stretching back over 10 years, so we can use them immediately and effectively. We have also identified several new KPIs that we will establish during the time frame of this plan and continue into the future. As part of the Inter-Governmental Agreement between UA and TUSD, Cooper Center will also compare these KPIs for TUSD and Non-TUSD schools and groups.

Currently Utilized Key Performance Indicators:

- Field Trip Group Size (Number of Students) by Grade Level and Field Trip Type (Half Day, Full Day, Overnight, Multi-Night)
- Facility Utilization – Field Trips: This measure shows the number of available days and nights for each program year versus the days and nights that are actually used. It is shown as a percentage
- Number of Students – The number of students served by each of Cooper Center's programs and totals for on-site field trips, classroom visits, virtual programs, and other community events/programs
- Schools – The number of unique schools participating in programs and the frequency of schools attending (schools attending multiple times in a given program year)
- Operational Cost – Costs associated with operating each of Cooper Center's programs and overall
- Contact Hours – A measure of the time of engagement for Cooper Center staff and volunteers with program participants

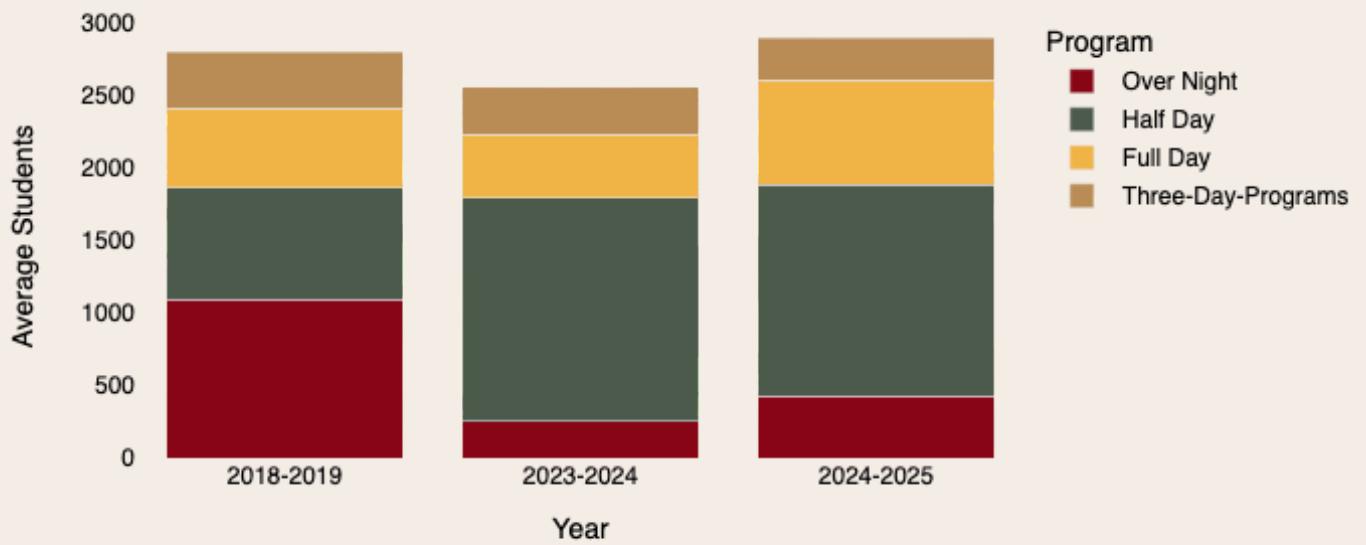
Future KPI's

- Program Quality – develop and use evaluation tools for students and teachers to assess program effectiveness and impact
- Teacher Engagement – Track teacher information through their participation in Cooper Center programs from year to year. Track returning teachers and their longevity with Cooper Center programs and the numbers of new teachers participating. Data will be utilized to inform marketing and communications efforts.
- Other – Cooper Center and its partners may identify other new KPIs as our programs grow and change.



Cooper Center has experienced an increase in Half Day and Full Day programs since the pandemic while Overnight and Earthkeepers programs have declined. With a focus on longer duration experiences for children, our goal is promoting Overnight and Earthkeepers experiences more heavily to increase their program numbers during the years of this strategic plan.

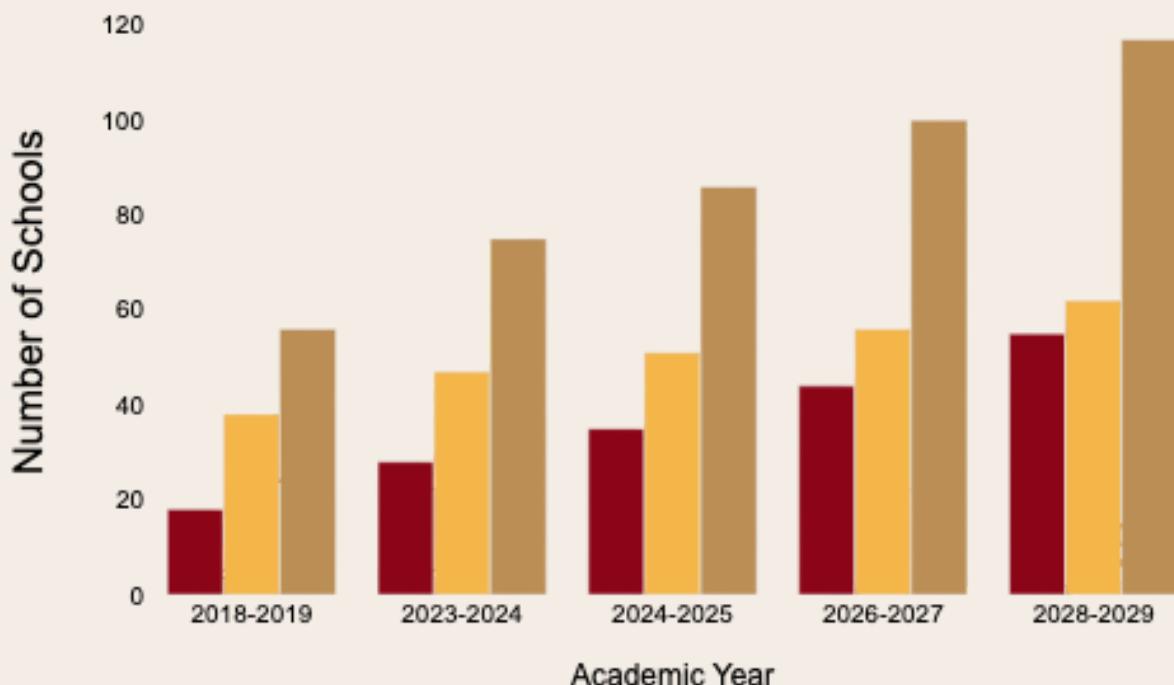
Average Student Attendance by Year and Program



Average group size for our field trip programs has stayed steady when comparing pre- and post-pandemic numbers. Our goal is to increase average group size across all programs during the four years of this Strategic Plan.

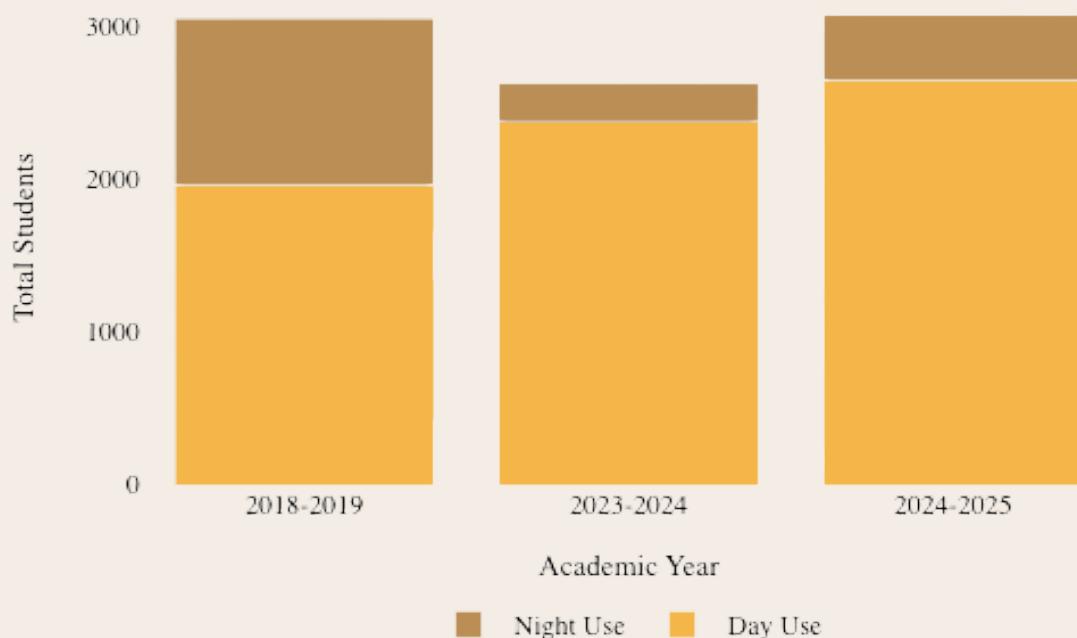
Growth in Number of Schools that use Cooper

■ Non-TUSD ■ TUSD ■ Total



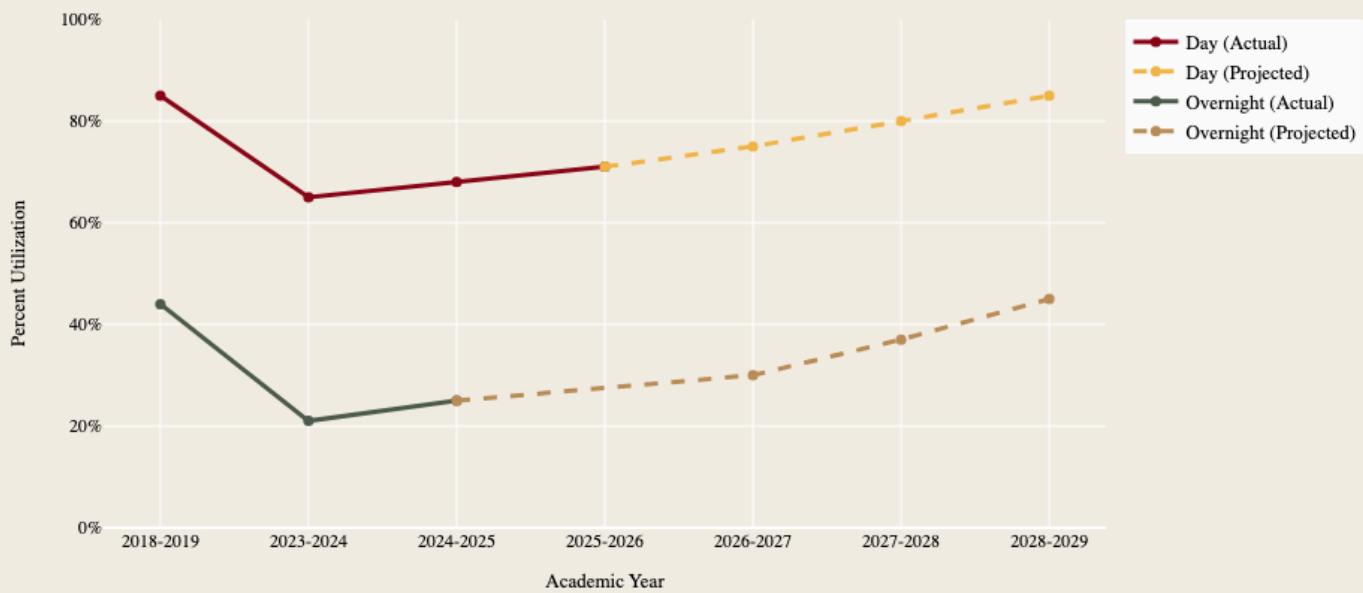
There has seen an increase in the number of TUSD and Non-TUSD schools served by our field trip programs since the pandemic. Our goal is to continue to increase the programs offered and the schools served during the years of this plan while continuing to reserve 80% of our programs for TUSD schools, as is required by our Inter-Governmental Agreement.

Day Use vs Night Use Attendance by Year



This graph shows the dramatic decline of overnight programs since the pandemic. Our goal is to return overnight use to pre-pandemic levels by the end of the 2028-2029 program year.

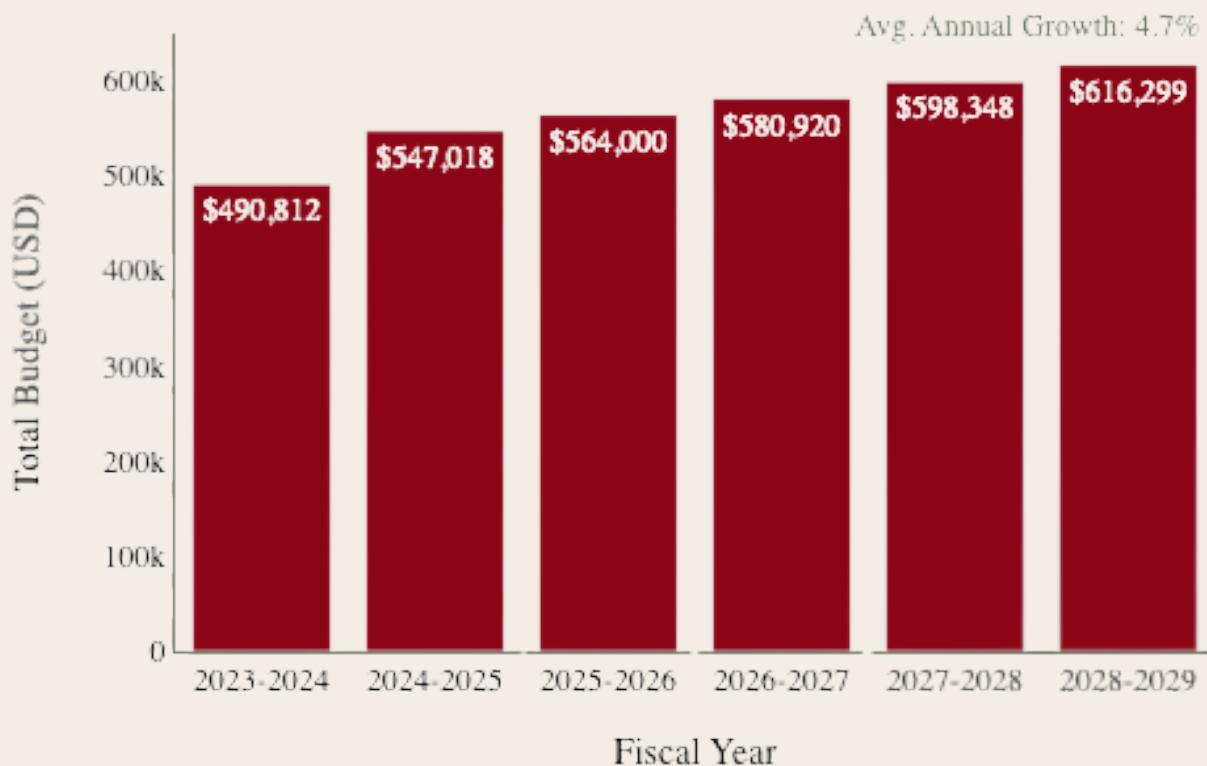
On Site Program Utilization Rates Day vs Overnight (Actual and Projected)



* Overnight 2025-2026: Estimated usage based on historical data. Due to construction, no overnight utilization was possible

Utilization focuses on the number of days and nights used during the program year. Utilization of days and nights has declined since the pandemic, and our goal during the years of this strategic plan are to return to pre-pandemic utilization numbers.

Cooper Center Budget with Projections by Fiscal Year

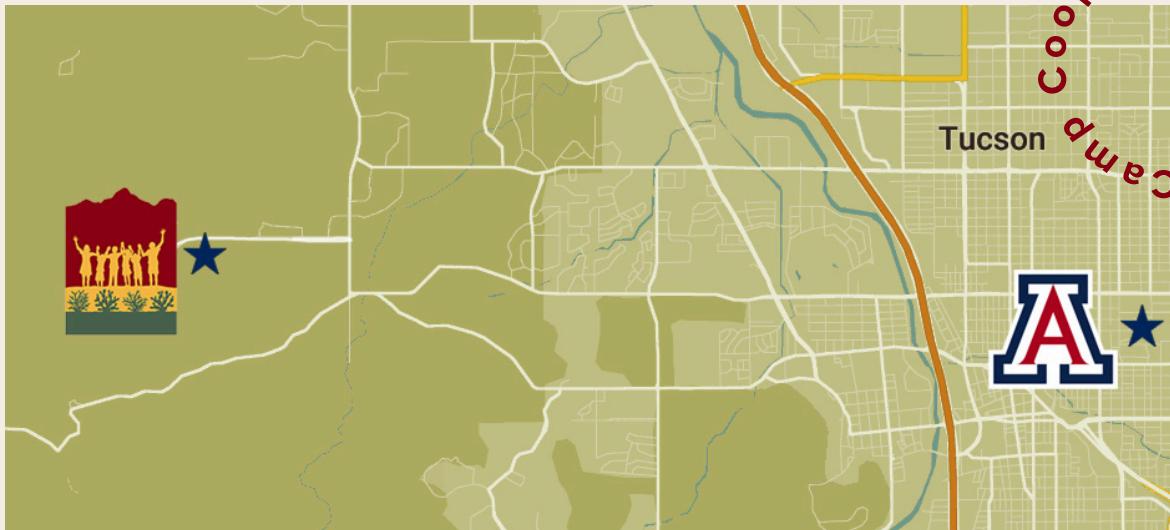


CONTACT

Email: coe-coopercenter@arizona.edu

Phone: (520) 743-7422

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 210069 Tucson, AZ 85721



5403 W Trails End Rd Tucson, AZ 85745

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@coopercenteraz

Visit Our Website!

<https://coopercenter.arizona.edu/>

The Cooper Center for Environmental Learning sits on the traditional homelands of the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui, who have stewarded this land from time immemorial.