The passPORTS Program

Five-Year Impact Report
2020–2025

A Transformative Partnership between CUE, California State Parks PORTS Program, and Parks California.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

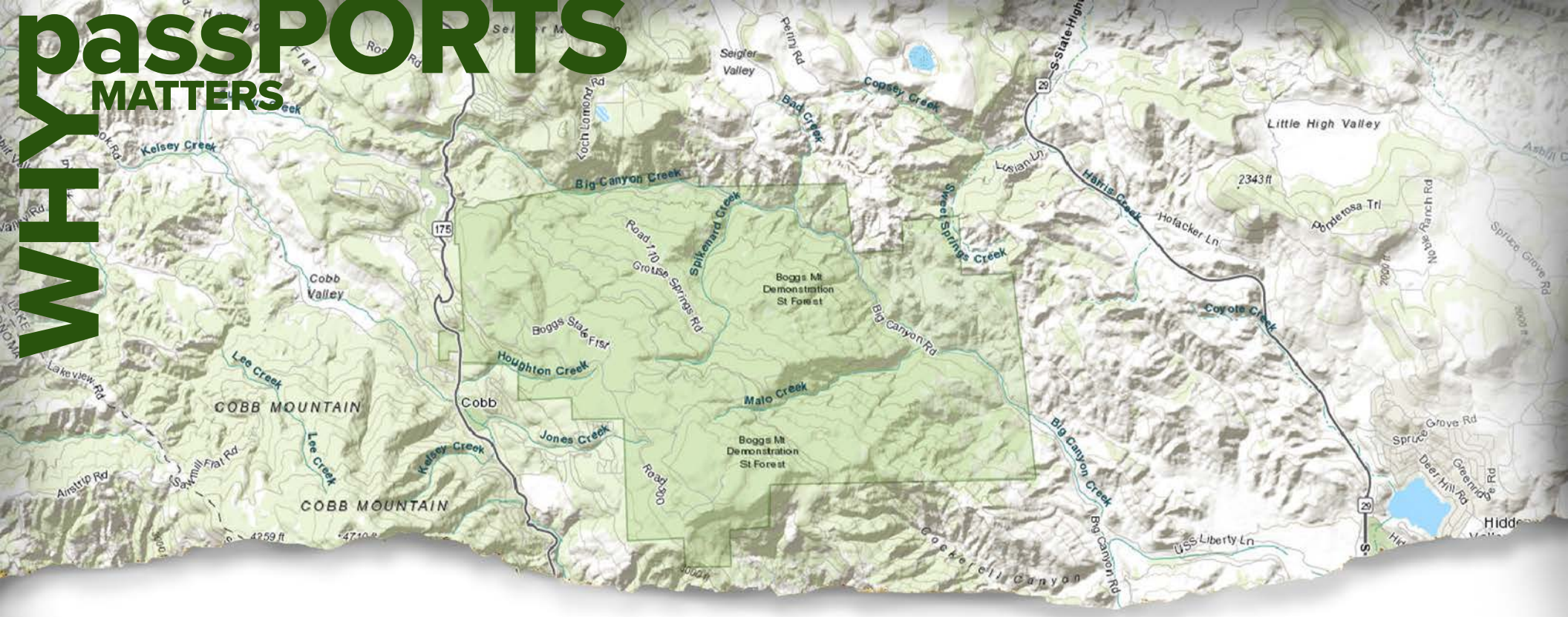
What if every student explores California's State Parks as part of their learning journey?

Launched in 2020, the passPORTS Program built on the success of the PORTS (Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students) virtual field trip model. Created in response to urgent high-quality digital tools with fully supported in-person visits.

In partnership with CUE and Parks California, California State Parks created a replicable, equitable model to bring environmental, cultural, and historical learning to K–12 classrooms—whether rural, urban, or under-served.

The result? A scalable, sustainable initiative that reached over 17,000 students, prioritizes Title I schools, and helps students see California State Parks as spaces of belonging, learning, and discovery.

WHY passPORTS MATTERS



Despite the promise of public lands for all, many students—especially in under-resourced schools—have never set foot in a state park. In a 2022 statewide needs assessment, educators identified the three biggest barriers:

- **Lack of awareness about opportunities or resources**
- **Transportation and logistical hurdles**
- **Challenges scheduling and connecting with park staff**

HOW passPORTS BREAKS BARRIERS

passPORTS doesn't just acknowledge these issues—it solves for them: We built simple, tech-enabled pathways to schedule both virtual and in-person park experiences.

We offered fully reimbursed, concierge-supported field trips—no grants, no red tape.

"Without funding for the transportation, this field trip would not have been possible. I also never heard of seeing Año Nuevo elephant seals before as it is fairly distant from San Jose. Prior to consulting with the program coordinator, I would not have thought a field trip would have been possible that far out."

—

Thi,
San Jose Public School Teacher

We created turnkey, standards-aligned lesson plans tailored to local, under-represented stories.

Educators called it a "plug-and-play" resource.

Park staff called it "purpose-restoring."

Students called it "the best day of school ever."

HOW THE MODEL WORKS

passPORTS is not just a program—it's a full-circle learning system:

Before: Live virtual programs bringing parks into the classroom with a curated curriculum.

During: Free, in-person experiences at California State Parks, with all costs covered.

After: Student reflection, project-based learning, and storytelling.

This model, known as **blended-access**, is built for 21st-century learning. It's flexible, place-based, equity-centered, and deeply aligned to both school standards and State Parks' interpretive goals.

The model is based on forming deep and meaningful connections between parks and classrooms, which is expressed through highly personalized multi-touch experiences.

With the help of a specialized and knowledgeable park coordinator, educators discover a world of plug-and-play digital resources and generate new, innovative ways to expand student learning possibilities. These resources equip educators with the tools to integrate park learning in a way that is both exciting and relevant to their students and their learning goals. Most participants extended the learning past the field-trip day, with student projects ranging from scientific reports, writing exercises, and visual arts.

HOW THE MODEL WORKS

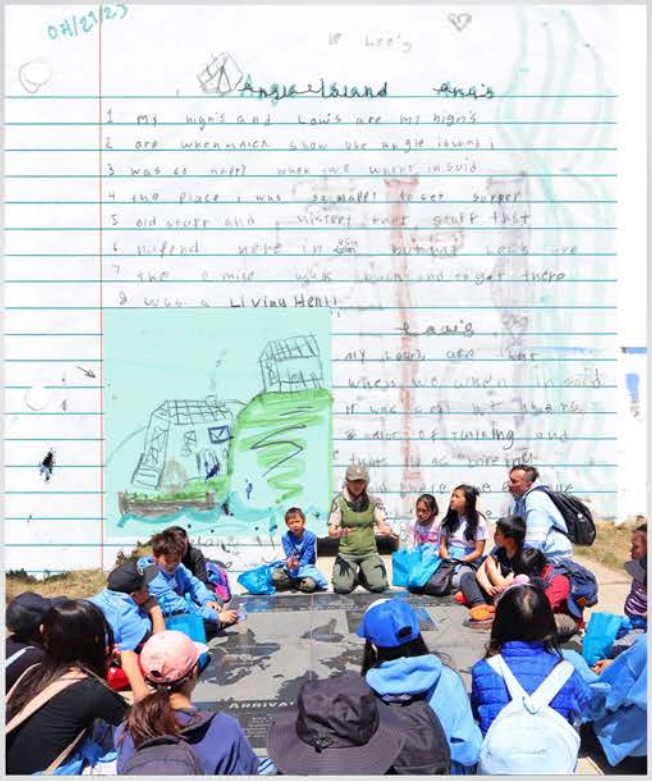
A few key examples include:

Bilingual classes from Garden Grove Unified District connected via 1-1 live, virtual instruction with Crystal Cove to learn about tide-pool ecology. After all three classes attended their field trip at the coastal park, students created organism fact sheets using both English and Vietnamese.

5th Grade English Language Arts classrooms tuned into a live PORTScast webinar to explore Angel Island Immigration Station stories virtually. The teachers used digital curriculum and activities found on the PORTS library to develop content understanding. The students then rode the ferry to the island and explored the park in-person, before creating written informational pieces to strengthen their ELA skills.

For three years in a row, a school in Kernville School District has organized an overnight camping trip to the California Coast, visiting Carpinteria State Beach and La Purisima Mission State Historic Park. Students interact with the natural and cultural resources 200 miles away from their home. Afterwards, they create a custom Pokemon deck inspired by the organisms they learned about, with cards such like 'Upwelling', 'Pacific Mole Crab', and 'The Sun' with certain powers and ecosystem actions.

HOW THE MODEL WORKS



It is clear that the passPORTS program not only enhances the field-trip experience, but sets the foundation for long-lasting connections.

Educators think of parks as an integral part of the education landscape and anticipate both virtual and in-person programming with California State Parks year after year. They also take advantage of PwORTS asynchronus learning resources throughout the academic year, not just around the field-trip date.

One teacher says:

“The information that I learned about PORTScasts and PORTS on-demand resources has given me new insight into ways that I can expose my students to parks they might not otherwise have an opportunity to visit.”

IMPACT

BY THE NUMBERS

17,000 Students Engaged In Blended Access Field Trips

247 Schools Engaged

50 Distinct State Parks Visited

850 Educators Trained

$821 Average cost per field trip

367 Field trips completed

KEY FINDINGS

92%

OF TEACHERS said that blending virtual engagement and digital tools enhanced the in-person experience at the park.

"**Students were able to complete assignments connecting their virtual learning to their in-person experience**. This allowed them to **think more critically in anticipation for the field trip** and also allowed for more meaningful reflections after the live field trip.

The virtual tour **lightened the load on our teacher preparation** for the field trip and also made managing our students easier on the day of the field trip. Knowing what to expect really made a difference in the way students behaved on the day of the field trip."

—

Natasha,
Title I Elementary School Teacher

KEY FINDINGS

FOR LESS THAN $20/STUDENT

passPORTS provides all-inclusive and transformative park learning experiences, with built-in concierge services. The ease of coordinating and receiving funding alleviates burden from K-12 schools and teachers.

"The program was easy to figure out, easy to apply to and provided my class with all the funding they needed to make this field trip a reality! Thank you!"

100% OF EDUCATORS

cite access to funding and increasing student curiosity as main reasons for engaging with passPORTS.

Other strong reasons include spending time outdoors, providing real world context for learning, and meeting content standards.

passPORTS provides crucial first-encounters for under-resourced students. Many participants report their passPORTS field trip as their only trip outside of school grounds, their first time exploring outdoor spaces (first time seeing snow, the ocean, or a forest. etc), and/or their first time engaging with a State Park.

"As students at a Title 1 school, they often don't have as many enrichment experiences as we would want for them, and many said it was their favorite memory of 5th grade!"

Survey data from Cal Poly Humboldt indicates **increased environmental awareness and student efficacy** after blended-access experiences.

BIPOC students reported **significant post-trip gains in self-confidence and motivation**.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Students Say:

"I didn't know a place like this even existed. I want to take my family."

Educators Say:

"This is real-world learning—every student should experience it."

Park Staff Say:

"I feel reconnected to my mission. This is why I do this work."

CHALLENGES WE SOLVED

TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS

Simple cost estimation and full reimbursement

CURRICULUM MISALIGNMENT

Co-designed, standards-based, and culturally relevant

SCHEDULING COMPLEXITY

Easy online booking and concierge support

EQUITY GAPS

Priority access for Title I schools and under-served regions

CO-CREATING LEARNING CONTENT

The passPORTS symposium model has evolved to innovate the way parks develop their K-12 educational resources.

Bringing together teachers for immersive, in-park events not only increases their awareness of the rich learning experiences available at parks, but allows educators to generate exciting and relevant lesson ideas.

California State Parks and California Educators Together partnered for the first overnight Climate Curriculum Design Symposium, creating an accessible, multi-media, interdisciplinary climate change curriculum for Elementary, Middle, and High School classrooms.

Both single-day and multi-day/ overnight educator experiences are important for maintaining a community of active and passionate educators that collaborate with each other and with park personnel.

STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

We've learned that this model works—but only when resourced.

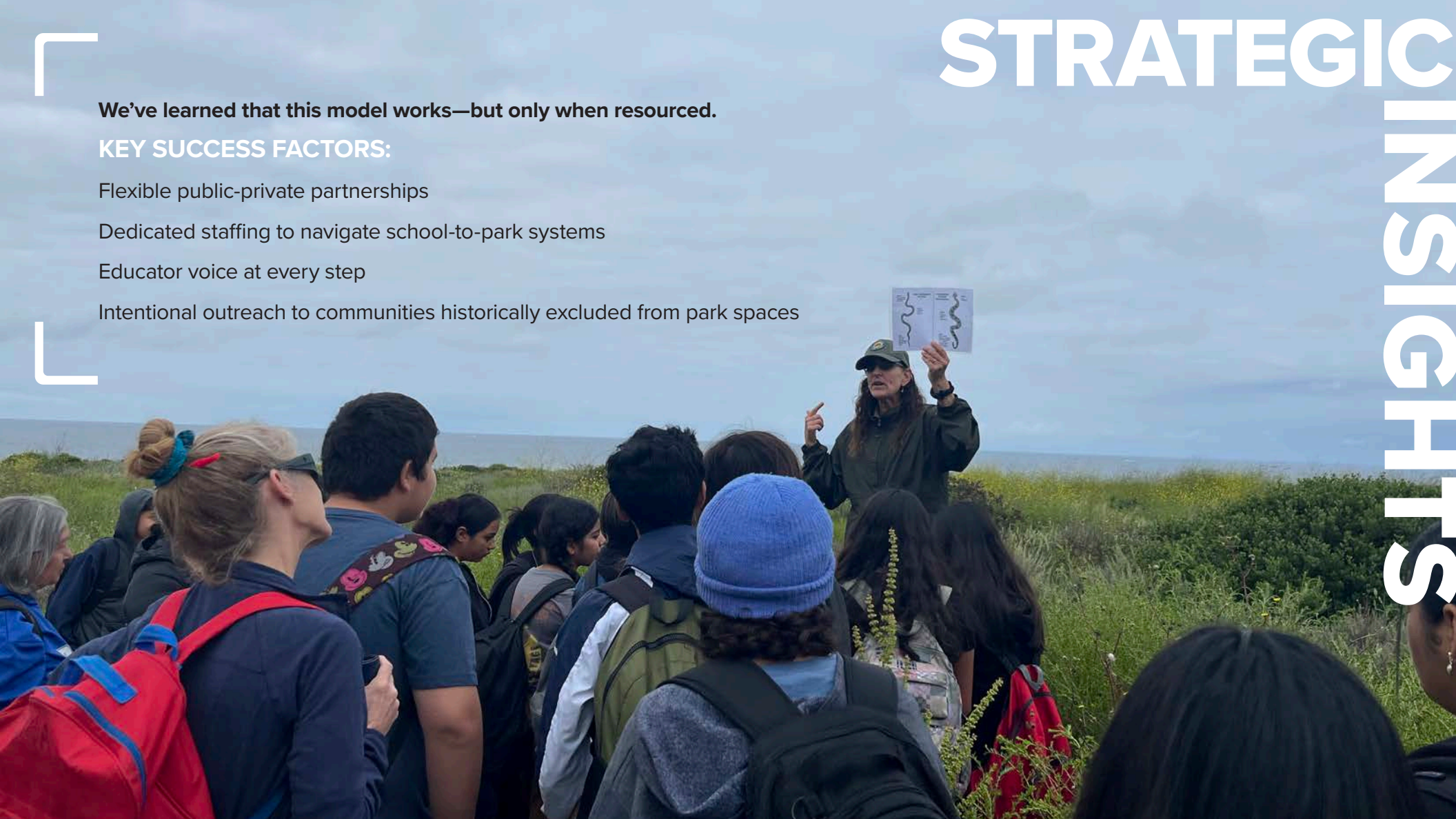
KEY SUCCESS FACTORS:

Flexible public-private partnerships

Dedicated staffing to navigate school-to-park systems

Educator voice at every step

Intentional outreach to communities historically excluded from park spaces



VISION

2025–2030

The next five years are about growth—with integrity and intention.

OUR GOALS

Deepen partnerships with high-need districts (not just by geography, but complexity)

Expand the educator network with a statewide community of practice

Institutionalize field trip coordination within State Parks staffing models

Integrate STEAM, climate action, and ethnic studies where appropriate

Launch student-led stewardship and storytelling projects statewide

SUSTAINABILITY RECOMMENDATIONS

BASED ON FIVE YEARS OF LEARNING AND EVALUATION

GROW AWARENESS

Expand educator symposiums and outreach

Launch a centralized communications campaign

SUSTAIN TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

Establish a permanent fund administered by a nonprofit partner

BUILD DEDICATED STAFF CAPACITY

Fund positions that focus solely on K–12 engagement

Train park staff in culturally responsive, classroom-aligned interpretation

ADOPT POLICIES TO STANDARDIZE ENGAGEMENT

Create systems for tracking, feedback and data-informed iteration

Clarify approval pathways for partnerships and pilots to normalize field trips for public schools

EXPAND TECH INFRASTRUCTURE

Standardize scheduling tools across all parks

Maintain open access to curriculum platforms

THE PATH FORWARD

passPORTS is not just access

It's identity.

It's connection.

It's California.

passPORTS is not a one-off project.

It is a blueprint for what's possible when parks and schools collaborate intentionally—with equity at the center.

This is a blended learning model that reflects the realities of 21st-century education. By leveraging technology to remove access barriers and introduce students to State Parks through virtual experiences, passPORTS creates a pathway to meaningful in-person visits—not as a bonus, but as an essential part of the learning arc. This full-circle journey engages students before, during, and after their park experience, anchoring environmental and cultural literacy in both digital and physical spaces

With continued support, we can expand this model across California—creating a new generation of students who feel connected to public lands and inspired to care for them.

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PARKS CALIFORNIA
It's in our nature