Building Trails and New Ideas
by Sabrina Carlson

On October 30th, 2017, eighteen students from The Peaks School 7th grade in Flagstaff traveled to the Schultz Tank trailhead and the Elden Mountain and Flagstaff Resupply Passages (Passages 32 and 33), to make improvements and repairs to the Arizona National Scenic Trail.

Before heading out to the trailhead, we had a brief discussion in the classroom about hydrology and what a sustainable trail looks like. We discussed the balance between a trail with some interesting obstacles and one with loose and rubbly rocks. They learned about contours, sheet flow and drainage.

Once at our work site, students set out in groups with tools to remove loose rocks, dig drains, and repair damaged tred. This group went after their tasks with enthusiasm and energy.

Of all the classes Seeds of Stewardship North works with, this one has the highest percentage of students with little to no exposure to the outdoors, wilderness and public lands. Everything from dirt to grubs, to using the restroom outdoors is new for most of these students. Sometimes these new things are met with a bit of resistance but with each exposure the comfort level grows and an appreciation for new experiences is expanded. There is something profoundly powerful about handing a teenager a sharp tool, pointing them at a piece of public land, and trusting them to do a good job. By the end of the day, the vast majority of the students were surprised at how much they enjoyed the work, felt a pride in accomplishment, and wanted to know about how they could pursue this type of work in the future. Most had never considered a career in conservation and land use management, but many walked away with new ideas about their capabilities and futures.

After the work was done, the students took a little time to wander around Schultz Tank, peering into the water to search for salamanders and fish, scanning the shoreline for animal tracks, and skipping rocks on the water. In a world where children grow up too fast, these rare moments of romping in the forest and playing by a pond are rare, important, and cherished.

More than just a new understanding of trails and land use, this group walked away seeing themselves in a whole new way.

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