Creating a Culture of Achievement

Across the United States, many Expeditionary Learning schools are experiencing student achievement gains that are erasing the achievement gap and placing every student on the path to college. These same schools are also setting the standard for rigorous project-based learning and the development of 21st Century Skills. What do these schools have in common?

One of the most critical elements that connects these high-performing Expeditionary Learning schools is the student culture in each building. These student cultures are not accidents. Rather, they have been intentionally designed by adults who care deeply about ensuring the learning and engagement of every student, every day. These cultures are cultivated by placing students at the center of every decision and ensuring that adults actively and consciously model everything they expect of students. In these schools, the adults “sweat the small stuff” through focusing on the “little” things to ensure that the big things don’t get out of hand.

In our experience, high-performing EL student cultures result from nurturing three interrelated aspects of school culture.

**A Culture of Quality**

- Students are invested in high quality, original work that addresses authentic needs and audiences beyond the classroom.
- Through revision and multiple drafts, students embrace the notion that working hard and making mistakes are expected parts of the learning process.
- Students “own” their achievement, reflect on their progress and discuss their growth honestly using assessment data, learning targets and examples of their work.

**A Culture of Character**

- Students embrace a consistent set of values that express high expectations for achievement, character and behavior.
- Students are courteous and respectful to one another, school staff and guests and serve as student ambassadors beyond the school walls.
- Students become leaders in the school and beyond through decision-making, self-reflection and service.

**A Culture of Connection**

- Students build strong relationships with other students, their teachers and school leaders.
- Students collaborate deeply with their peers and build a sense that they are part of a group with the collective capacity to accomplish challenging tasks.
A Different Approach to Teaching and Learning

In Expeditionary Learning schools...

**Learning is active.** Students are scientists, urban planners, historians, and activists, investigating real community problems and collaborating with peers to develop creative, actionable solutions.

**Learning is challenging.** Students at all levels are pushed and supported to do more than they think they can. Excellence is expected in the quality of their work and thinking.

**Learning is meaningful.** Students apply their skills and knowledge to real-world issues and problems and make positive change in their communities. They see the relevance of their learning and are motivated by understanding that learning has purpose.

**Learning is public.** Through formal structures of presentation, exhibition, critique, and data analysis, students and teachers build a shared vision of pathways to achievement.

**Learning is collaborative.** School leaders, teachers, students, and families share rigorous expectations for quality work, achievement, and behavior. Trust, respect, responsibility, and joy in learning permeate the school culture.

When implemented robustly, the Expeditionary Learning core practices detailed in this book create school environments that promote deep engagement in learning and support students to achieve at high levels. EL students gain skills critical to college readiness and lifelong success—literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, persistence toward excellence, and active citizenship—as well as mastery of subject-area knowledge.

EL students around the country are outperforming their state and district peers on standardized tests. In our high schools, 100% college acceptance is the standard. Research shows that our teachers are closing critical achievement gaps for English language learners and for Hispanic, African-American, special education, and low-income students.

This book is a resource for all teachers and school leaders who wish to implement the EL core practices. We hope it inspires educators to challenge themselves as practitioners and challenge their students to reach their potential as learners and leaders.
Expeditionary Learning Design Principles

Expeditionary Learning is built on ten design principles that reflect the educational values and beliefs of Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound. These principles animate our research-based model for transforming teaching, learning, and the culture of schools.

1. The Primacy of Self-Discovery
Learning happens best with emotion, challenge, and the requisite support. People discover their abilities, values, passions, and responsibilities in situations that offer adventure and the unexpected. In Expeditionary Learning schools, students undertake tasks that require perseverance, fitness, craftsmanship, imagination, self-discipline, and significant achievement. A teacher’s primary task is to help students overcome their fears and discover they can do more than they think they can.

2. The Having of Wonderful Ideas
Teaching in Expeditionary Learning schools fosters curiosity about the world by creating learning situations that provide something important to think about, time to experiment, and time to make sense of what is observed.

3. The Responsibility for Learning
Learning is both a personal process of discovery and a social activity. Everyone learns both individually and as part of a group. Every aspect of an Expeditionary Learning school encourages both children and adults to become increasingly responsible for directing their own personal and collective learning.

4. Empathy and Caring
Learning is fostered best in communities where students’ and teachers’ ideas are respected and where there is mutual trust. Learning groups are small in Expeditionary Learning schools, with a caring adult looking after the progress and acting as an advocate for each child. Older students mentor younger ones, and students feel physically and emotionally safe.

5. Success and Failure
All students need to be successful if they are to build the confidence and capacity to take risks and meet increasingly difficult challenges. But it is also important for students to learn from their failures, to persevere when things are hard, and to learn to turn disabilities into opportunities.

6. Collaboration and Competition
Individual development and group development are integrated so that the value of friendship, trust, and group action is clear. Students are encouraged to compete, not against each other, but with their own personal best and with rigorous standards of excellence.

7. Diversity and Inclusion
Both diversity and inclusion increase the richness of ideas, creative power, problem-solving ability, and respect for others. In Expeditionary Learning schools, students investigate and value their different histories and talents as well as those of other communities and cultures. Schools and learning groups are heterogeneous.

8. The Natural World
A direct and respectful relationship with the natural world refreshes the human spirit and teaches the important ideas of recurring cycles and cause and effect. Students learn to become stewards of the earth and of future generations.

9. Solitude and Reflection
Students and teachers need time alone to explore their own thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas. They also need to exchange their reflections with other students and with adults.

10. Service and Compassion
We are crew, not passengers. Students and teachers are strengthened by acts of consequential service to others, and one of an Expeditionary Learning school’s primary functions is to prepare students with the attitudes and skills to learn from and be of service.
The Expeditionary Learning Core Practices
Our core practices address five key dimensions of life in school.

**Curriculum**
Our approach to curriculum makes standards come alive for students by connecting learning to real-world issues and needs. Academically rigorous learning expeditions, case studies, projects, fieldwork, and service learning inspire students to think and work as professionals do, contributing high-quality work to authentic audiences beyond the classroom. Our schools ensure that all students have access to a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, and regularly analyze the curriculum to check alignment to standards and opportunities for all students to meet those standards.

**Instruction**
Our classrooms are alive with discovery, inquiry, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. Teachers talk less. Students talk and think more. Lessons have explicit purpose, guided by learning targets for which students take ownership and responsibility. In all subject areas, teachers differentiate instruction and maintain high expectations in order to bring out the best in all students and cultivate a culture of high achievement.

**Assessment**
Our leaders, teachers, and students embrace the power of student-engaged assessment practices to build student ownership of learning, focus students on reaching standards-based learning targets, and drive achievement. This approach to assessment is key to ensuring that schools achieve educational equity. Students continually assess and improve the quality of their work through the use of models, reflection, critique, rubrics, and work with experts. Staff members engage in ongoing data inquiry and analysis, examining everything from patterns in student work to results from formal assessments, disaggregating data by groups of students to recognize and address gaps in achievement.

**Culture and Character**
Our schools build cultures of respect, responsibility, courage, and kindness, where students and adults are committed to quality work and citizenship. School structures and traditions such as crew, community meetings, exhibitions of student work, and service learning ensure that every student is known and cared for, that student leadership is nurtured, and that contributions to the school and world are celebrated. Students and staff are supported to do better work and be better people than they thought possible.

**Leadership**
Our school leaders build a cohesive school vision focused on student achievement and continuous improvement, and they align all activities in the school to that vision. Leaders use data wisely, boldly shape school structures to best meet student needs, celebrate joy in learning, and build a school-wide culture of trust and collaboration. Leadership in our schools goes beyond a single person or team—it is a role and expectation for all.
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Core Practices in This Section
- Mapping Skills and Content
- Designing Learning Expeditions
- Formulating Guiding Questions
- Selecting Case Studies
- Designing Projects and Products
- Incorporating Fieldwork, Experts, and Service Learning
- Producing High-Quality Student Work
- Teaching Global Skills and Knowledge
- Supporting College and Career Readiness
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Core Practices in This Section
- Planning Effective Lessons
- Delivering Effective Lessons
- Differentiating Instruction
- Teaching Reading across the Disciplines
- Teaching Writing across the Disciplines
- Teaching Mathematics
- Teaching Science
- Teaching Social Studies
- Teaching the Arts
- Teaching and Promoting Fitness and Wellness
Assessment

Expeditionary Schools leaders, teachers, and students embrace the power of student-engaged assessment practices to build student ownership of learning, focus students on reaching standards-based learning targets, and drive achievement. This approach to assessment is key to ensuring that schools achieve educational equity. Students continually assess and improve the quality of their work through the use of models, reflection, critique, rubrics, and work with experts. Staff members engage in ongoing data inquiry and analysis, examining everything from patterns in student work to results from formal assessments, disaggregating data by groups of students to recognize and address gaps in achievement.

Core Practices in This Section
- Using Student-Engaged Assessment to Create a Culture of Engagement and Achievement
- Using Assessment for Learning Strategies on a Daily Basis
- Creating Quality Assessments
- Raising Achievement on Assessments of Learning
- Communicating Student Achievement
Culture and Character

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Core Practices in This Section
- Building a Community of Learning
- Fostering Character
- Establishing Structures for Knowing Students Well
- Engaging Families and the Community in the Life of the School
- Creating Beautiful Spaces for Learning
- Promoting Adventure
Leadership

Expeditionary Learning school leaders build a cohesive school vision focused on student achievement and continuous improvement, and they align all activities in the school to that vision. Leaders use data wisely, boldly shape school structures to best meet student needs, celebrate joy in learning, and build a school-wide culture of trust and collaboration. Leadership in EL schools goes beyond a single person or team—it is a role and expectation for all.

Core Practices in This Section
- Fostering a School Vision and Strategy
- Structuring Time to Support the Vision
- Aligning Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for Student Achievement
- Using Data to Drive Instruction
- Cultivating a Positive School Culture
- Leading Professional Learning
- Promoting Shared Leadership
- Shaping School Operations to Elevate Student Achievement