
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

Sierra Expeditionary Learning School
Truckee, California
Truckee-Tahoe School District

Transcript: An Expeditionary Learning School Takes Off in California's Mountains

Kim Bradley, Parent, Founding Member, SELS Board Member: There was the desire for smaller class sizes; parents really wanted a multi-age experience and we were really looking for something that had more of a character focus. We went through a visioning process where we brain-stormed what our values are and what it was that we were looking for and then we researched different models. But we really were drawn to Expeditionary Learning for that character program and the integrated learning. We really liked the hands-on approach.

David Manahan, SELS Principal: Expeditionary Learning started in the early 1990's as a federal initiative. It was a joint effort between Outward Bound and Harvard Education. The idea was to bring the profound, character, personal, experiences that students would get in Outward Bound and try to bring those into a classroom setting, and then to try to make that classroom setting more meaningful, more connected and more engaging for students.

And there's 10 design principles that are based a lot out of Kurt Hahn and Outward Bound. And then from those each school can create different character programs, so that was one of the first things that we did when we got together staff before opening and we used the SIERRA word as an acronym for Strength, Integrity, Empathy, Respect, Responsibility, and Adventure. And then, we defined those both in a social-relational idea—so, for example Strength is I can stand up for myself, or I can stand up for others—and then we also define those in what we call habits of work, that we apply more to academic learning, and Strength would be something like I can persevere through a difficult assignment or a difficult project.

There's also an embedded service component into most of the things we do. There's expected fieldwork to connect the learning to the communities; a push to use experts, again, to help connect to the communities. There's lots of hands-on and experiential type of learning and projects and there is a big focus on presentations and being able to speak publicly.

One of the big pieces is building the character piece. So besides academic learning students learn about who they are, who they are in a community, what it means to be part of a community and the skill sets that go along with both that being a community member and the skill sets that go along with learning in general.

Kim Bradley: We are a public charter underneath our school district. One key element that was really important to our charter school was making sure that we had a student population that was reflective of our community.

David Manahan: SELS is in Truckee, the mountain tourist town in the Sierra Nevadas, [that] because of its outdoor appeal and its beauty, has drawn a very wealthy population, but we also have a very high low-socio-economic population that has either been here historically or is here just to do work and as labor and so the school district as a whole has about 40% of students that qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program.

Kim Bradley: So we created a lottery system where we have a certain percentage of our lottery reserved for families that fit into our free and reduced lunch category. From the very beginning we were talking to school district administrators about how we could best align with the district services. We were very intentional about making sure our school was accessible to all students. We created our location on the district campus so that we could be on the bus line, so that we could have the lunch program, our EL program. We also work very closely with our school district to support our Special Education students. School administrators come to our board meetings, and representatives from our board go to the monthly district board meetings. And I feel like it's been a real mutual exchange.

David Manahan: I'd like to think that we've helped the district diversify some of their teaching methodologies. They've become a little more project-based, they have started to include a little more fieldwork and they have certainly started to increase their Character Ed. programs.

Robert Leri, Superintendent, Truckee-Tahoe School District: SELS brought to the school district an option for elementary students and also an option in terms of instructional models, being an expeditionary learning school with more thematic, hands-on educational opportunities. I think SELS had an early influence on the district in terms of looking at different ways of teaching and learning for students. And I think they helped influence some of the changes that have taken place in the last 6-plus years in the school district.

Kim Bradley: We really wanted an option that's going to work for all students and families and that really ties with our district, trying to break that reputation that charter schools sometimes get. So I feel like we have been able to create a successful model that is the very best of what a charter school can be.