

# EL EDUCATION

*formerly “Expeditionary Learning”*

EL Education’s comprehensive school model builds student capacity for three Dimensions of high achievement—character, mastery of skills and content, and high-quality student work—through the application of Core Practices centered on real-world learning and teamwork.

Scan QR code with your phone’s camera to access this content online.



## OVERVIEW

EL Education’s comprehensive improvement model transforms schools into hubs of opportunity where all students are able to reach their unique potential. The model redefines student achievement to align with what is most celebrated in adulthood—mastery of knowledge and skills, high-quality work, and character—and outlines a set of Core Practices that help bring these to life. Grounded in the belief that greater engagement leads to achievement, EL Education’s Core Practices support students in becoming self-directed learners as they grapple with complex, real-world issues like professionals. The model positions students as active and collaborative learners alongside their teachers, or as part of a crew rather than just as passengers.

The full EL Education model requires intensive in-person training and coaching over multiple years, and 152 schools spanning 35 states currently employ the full model. EL Education also has an open-source K-8 Language Arts Curriculum and a menu of professional development opportunities to support its implementation. ► [EL Education: A Leader of My Own Learning](#)



## What Makes This Model Innovative?



### Relevance

EL Education’s instructional approach is “real work for real students,” actualized through a curriculum that connects directly to real-world issues and needs. Students engage in case studies, fieldwork, collaboration with experts, and service learning.



### Connection & Community

The EL Education model is grounded in the principle of “Crew”—the belief that all members of the school are strengthened by collaboration and service to one another. Crew is both a school structure (similar to advisory) and a spirit or way of being that is achieved through character education, team building, and adventure.



### Active Self-Direction

Every aspect of the EL Education model supports students in taking responsibility for directing their own learning. Students track their progress toward standards-based learning targets, set goals, use assessments to understand the root causes of their successes and failures, and lead family conferences.

## DESIGN

### Goals

EL Education’s model is designed to transform public schools into places where all students achieve excellent, equitable outcomes by redefining and raising student achievement. [📖 Dimensions of Student Achievement](#)



#### Mastery of Knowledge and Skills

Students demonstrate both proficiency and deeper understanding in the knowledge and skills within each discipline and can apply that learning to novel tasks. Students demonstrate critical thinking and clear and compelling communication.

#### Character

Students develop the mindsets and skills to be effective learners in school, career, and life. They also work to become ethical people who use their learning to contribute to a better world. [📖 Character Framework](#)

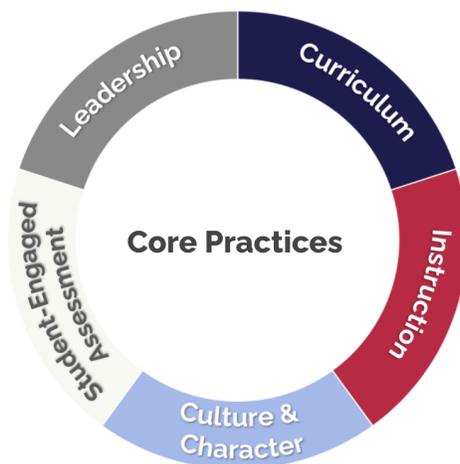
#### High-Quality Work

Students create complex, beautiful, authentic work that connects to real-world issues and formats, and when possible, is meaningful to the community beyond school. [📖 High Quality Work](#)

## Experience

The EL Education model defines a set of Core Practices that fall within five domains of schooling that shape student achievement: Curriculum, Instruction, Culture and Character, Student-Engaged Assessment, and Leadership.

[📄 Core Practices Domains](#) In the full expression of the model, these practices are implemented simultaneously and naturally overlap, creating a student experience that is centered on real-world application (via Learning Expeditions), student-directed learning, and community (via the culture and structure of Crew).



## Learning Expeditions

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The Learning Expeditions are the hallmark of the EL Education curricular structure. Lasting 6–12 weeks, Learning Expeditions focus on a compelling topic that connects an academic concept to the real world and provides students with a variety of experiences that allow them to grapple with complex, real-world issues and produce high-quality work products as though they are working professionals. ▶ [Expeditions Video](#) [📄 Sample Grade 1 Expedition](#) [📄 Sample Grade 7 Expedition](#) [📄 Sample Grade 10 Expedition](#)



Here are some examples of these experiences:

- **Case Studies:** These are investigations of unique people, places, institutions, or events that help students focus research and become experts on a given topic.
  - **Fieldwork:** These are experiences where students use the same research methods and standards of presentation as professionals in a given field. [📄 Fieldwork Overview](#)
  - **Engaging with Experts:** Teachers bring experts from the community into the classroom to collaborate with students on projects, teach them field-specific skills, and critique their work using professional standards. This helps students ensure the accuracy and quality of their work. [📄 Experts in the Classroom Guidance](#)
  - **Service Learning:** Students create academic products that provide a service to the community.
  - **Culminating Celebrations:** To close out a Learning Expedition, students will share their learning in a professional manner that allows audience members to ask questions and provide feedback to students. ▶ [Sharing Learning in Kindergarten](#) ▶ [Sharing Learning in Middle School](#)
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## Student-Directed Learning

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The EL Education model supports students to direct and manage their own learning. One of the model's crucial components is communicating with others about their progress. Here are some examples of experiences that promote student-directed learning:



- **Standards-Based Grading:** Students understand the standards they are working toward and how to explain how their grades reflect their degree of proficiency. They track their progress toward standards-based learning targets, set goals, and use a variety of data to reflect on their personal growth and challenges. ▶ [Why Standards-Based Grading?](#)  [Standards-Based Grading Guidance](#)
  - **Student-Led Family Conferences:** At least twice per year, students communicate their learning (e.g., growth, challenges, and goals) in each of the three Dimensions of Student Achievement to their caregiver. ▶ [Student-Led Conferences](#) ▶ [Students Own Their Progress](#)  [Student-Led Conference Guidance](#)
  - **Passage Presentations:** Students deliver presentations to demonstrate their readiness to progress to the next level of their educational journey (e.g., between elementary and middle school, middle and high school, and high school and college). ▶ [Passage Presentations](#)  [Passage Presentations Guidance](#)
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## Crew

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Crew is both a culture and a structure in the EL Education model and is a key component of the Character Framework.  [Building the Culture & Structure of Crew](#)  [Purpose of Crew](#)



- **Crew Culture:** The spirit of Crew serves as the foundation of an EL school's culture where all community members work as a team to help one another become effective learners and ethical people who contribute to a better world. To that end, schools establish and cultivate their own Habits of Character (e.g., respect, responsibility, kindness, courage) and support students to apply them both within and beyond the classroom. ▶ [Crew Culture](#)
  - **Crew Structure:** As a structure, Crew involves regular meetings (similar to advisory) where students and an adult Crew leader build meaningful relationships, discuss academic progress, and work on character development, among other things. The structure of Crew ensures all students are known and supported by a caring adult as well as by a group of peers for the duration of their time in school. ▶ [Crew Structure](#)
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## Supporting Structures

Individual Core Practices can be integrated into an existing school model. However, full execution of the EL Education model will require significant shifts to the way most schools approach curriculum and instruction, culture, and use of time as described below.

### **The EL Education model requires schools to align their curricula, instruction, and assessments to the three Dimensions of Student Achievement.**



#### **CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT**

To implement the EL Education model with fidelity, schools should be prepared to revise their existing approaches so they align with the Dimensions of Student Achievement. A subset of the model's 38 Core Practices that specifically address curriculum, instruction, and student-engaged assessment breaks down how schools can bring the Dimensions to life. [Core Practices](#)

At a high level, schools should prepare for the following:

- **Curriculum:** Use, design, or enhance existing curricula so that they allow students to grapple with standards-based content, complete projects aligned to real-world needs, and produce high-quality work.
- **Instruction:** Implement instruction that centers student voice and provides opportunities for critical thinking, inquiry, and collaboration.
- **Assessment:** Establish assessment practices that position students as leaders of their own learning.

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### **Every member of the school community should be part of a Crew that supports and strengthens one another.**



#### **SCHOOL COMMUNITY & CULTURE**

Leaders and teachers establish a culture of Crew among staff, including structures for cultivating a positive team culture such as team building activities, protocols for discussing diversity and equity, and conflict resolution processes. They also participate in Crew meetings focused on staff relationships, emotional health, and more. In turn, teachers foster a culture of Crew among students through practices that help students feel a sense of purpose and belonging within the community.

Crew is also a structure—similar to advisory in secondary classrooms or morning meetings in elementary classrooms—where small groups of students engage in a variety of activities focused on building relationships or developing character.



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### **Adults must demonstrate a willingness and capacity to reimagine many aspects of their school's systems and structures to implement EL Education's comprehensive model.**

In addition to learning and championing the Core Practices, leaders must

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## ADULT ROLES, HIRING, & LEARNING

also commit to facilitating one-on-one or small-group coaching cycles to help launch and improve the execution of new school-wide systems and structures.

Teachers must be willing to implement changes to their curriculum, instruction, and assessment in line with EL Education’s Core Practices and Dimensions of Student Achievement—a task that requires hard work, time, and a belief in student-directed, real-world learning. In addition, staff must be prepared to assume the role of Crew leader and commit to developing meaningful relationships with a small group of students over the course of multiple years.

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### **Time must be set aside for Core Practices such as daily Crew meetings, Learning Expeditions, and Student-Led Conferences.**

When learning to implement the EL Education model, leaders are taught to align school calendars and schedules to the vision they establish for their specific EL Education school, which sometimes requires that they advocate for control over time in conversations with district leaders and school boards. Here are some examples of a few key Core Practices and their influence on school schedules:



## SCHEDULE & USE OF TIME

- **Crew:** Teacher and student schedules include 30–60 minute Crew meetings, ideally every day. In elementary schools, this often takes the form of a morning meeting; in secondary schools, it serves a similar function to advisory.
- **Learning Expeditions:** Teachers are supported in scheduling Learning Expeditions multiple times throughout the school year. Learning Expeditions are typically 6–12 weeks long and involve various experiences that immerse students in real-world learning and allow them to produce high-quality, professional work.
- **Student-Directed Learning:** The school also schedules periodic activities that promote student-directed learning, such as Student-Led Conferences, which occur twice per year, and Passage Presentations, which occur once per year for students transitioning between lower and upper schools or graduating.



## FAMILY & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

### **The model is best supported when schools build relationships with community organizations and cultural institutions to support Learning Expeditions.**

A hallmark of the EL Education model is the Learning Expedition. Students engage in fieldwork at community organizations and cultural institutions, and teachers bring experts into the classroom to mentor students in aspects of their profession. These experiences rely on the cultivation of strong relationships with community partners.

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## CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

**A strategy for continuous improvement is vital and EL Education supports partner schools to establish one in their context.**

In the initial years of partnering with EL Education, schools that implement the full model are supported to establish a strategy for continuous improvement and are taught about the effective use of data and change management.

# IMPLEMENTATION

## Supports Offered

[EL Education's](#) comprehensive school design model requires a 4-year commitment and provides ongoing, intensive support. Below are details about those supports as well as stand-alone resources and services EL Education provides for schools that do not have the capacity or desire to commit to the full model at this time.

### School Design Partnership

*Cost Associated*



Schools accepted as EL Education School Design partners engage in a 4-year process for a fee. This involves a predetermined schedule of direct service days as well as slots at EL Education conferences, seminars, and institutes via the following timeline:

- 4-month partnership development process
- 5-month partnership launch
- 4 years of support with school-wide implementation
- *Optional support for continuous improvement years 5+*

As of 2022, 42 of the 152 EL Education schools have gone through the process of being *Credentialed*, which means that they have been an EL partner school for at least four years and have met a set of rigorous goals and outcomes aligned to the three Dimensions of Student Achievement. See pages 16-18 of the partnership document for an overview of credentialing requirement. [Request for Partners](#)

### [Learn More](#)

### Core Practices

*Free*



Schools that do not have the desire or capacity to commit to becoming an EL Education school but would still like to implement some of its research-based practices can refer to the open-source Core Practice document for access to the 38 practices and steps for implementation. School design partners also use this document in their daily work.

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[Access Now](#)

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**EL Education Library**

*Free*



EL Education has a searchable library of videos, guidelines, and artifacts on its website. Some resources are open-source while others require a \$35 annual subscription.

[Access Now](#)

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**K-8 Language Arts Curriculum**

*Free*



The EL Education K-8 Language Arts Curriculum was created by teachers for teachers and aligns to college and career readiness standards. Currently reaching over 500,000 students, the open-source curriculum is designed to support equity and inclusion, social-emotional learning, a deep understanding of rich literature and complex texts, and real-world learning. It also supports students to own their learning.

[Learn More](#)

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**Curriculum Services**

*Cost Associated*



Schools that do not have the desire or capacity to commit to becoming an EL Education school but would still like to receive support to implement the K-8 Language Arts Curriculum (which was designed around many of the same principles as the comprehensive model) can pay to receive curriculum support services. Options include:

- Professional development
- Self-paced, stand-alone online courses
- District partnerships
- Coaching

[Learn More](#)

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**Reach**

**152**

Schools

**35**

States

**60,000**

Students

**53%**

Free &  
Reduced Lunch

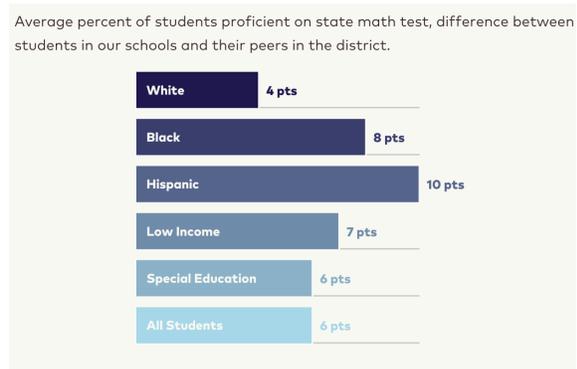
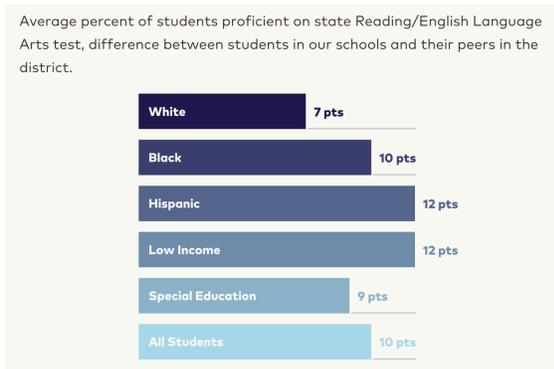
# Impact

## Overall Academic Impact

EL Education's whole-school model has been shown to improve student performance on both Reading/English language arts and math tests across all student groups, including students receiving Special Education services and students who are from low-income families. [📄](#)

[Mathematica Policy Research, 2013](#)

- Overall, students outperform peers by 10 points on Reading/ELA exams and 6 points on math exams.
- Special Education students outperform peers by 9 points on Reading/ELA exams and by 6 points on math exams.
- Low-income students outperform peers by 12 points on Reading/ELA exams and by 7 points on math exams.
- After three years of attending an EL Education middle school, students gain an average of 10 months in math achievement and 7 months in reading achievement.



Additionally, a study by the UMASS Donahue Institute calculated the number of non-proficient students in comparison schools who would have been expected to reach proficiency on state exams had they been taught in an EL school as captured below. [📄](#) [UMASS Donahue Institute, 2011](#)

- Elementary ELA: 47% in 2008; 62.6% in 2009
- Elementary Math: 59% in 2008; 71.6% in 2009
- Middle School ELA: 44.3% in 2008; 71.6% in 2009

## Character Impact

A 2019 study looked at whether students in EL Education school develop stronger ethical character than students in non-EL comparison groups. They found that EL Education students have a greater sense of purpose and belonging and are more likely to say that their teachers care about them. [📄](#) [EL Education Annual Report, 2020](#)

## Post-Secondary Success

- In 2019, EL Education high schools saw a 94% graduation rate and 94% college acceptance rate. [📄](#) [EL Education Annual Report, 2019](#)
- In 2020, the 42 Credentialed Schools also saw a 94% graduation rate and 94% college acceptance rate. [📄](#) [\(EL Education Annual Report, 2020](#)

# Contact

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# RESOURCES



## [Who Am I? A Leader of My Own Learning](#)

See the EL Education Model in action as students become champions of their academic and character development.

## EL Education

### Dimensions of Student Achievement

Dimension of Achievement	Students	Teachers and Leaders
Mastery of Knowledge and Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrate proficiency and deeper understanding over time in a body of knowledge and skills within each discipline</li><li>• Apply their learning to transfer knowledge and skills to novel, meaningful tasks</li><li>• Think critically, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize complex ideas and consider multiple perspectives</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create the curricula, instruction, and assessments on <b>Algebra, non-algebra, and aligned with standards</b></li><li>• Use assessment practices that position students as leaders of their own learning</li><li>• Use meaningful data for both teachers and students to track progress toward learning goals</li></ul>

## [Dimensions of Student Achievement](#)

Explore how EL Education reimagines student achievement for students and teachers.



### Expanded View of Student Achievement

For over 25 years, EL Education has been bringing to life a three-dimensional vision of student achievement.

- In addition to strong test scores, our students:
- Achieve **Mastery of Knowledge and Skills**
- Develop **Character**
- Create **High-Quality Work**

EL Education combines challenging work with the joy of discovery, pride in mastery, and meaningful application of

## [Diving into EL Education's Character Framework](#)

This document introduces each component of the character dimension of student achievement.

## EL Education

### Creating High Quality Work in EL Education Schools: Multiple Levels of Support

In some schools, students are provided with very little support when creating a product resulting from a project. Too often, the products students create are simply "assignments" that students are expected to complete with a high degree of autonomy, often just following a set of directions, and often on their own time outside of school.

In contrast, EL believes that attending to many or all of the levels of support listed below is crucial to giving students clarity and a vision of quality when involved in a crafting a product. These steps do not represent a fixed or required sequence, but we hope that teachers use these strategies to support students in creating quality work.

## [Creating High-Quality Work](#)

This document outlines the levels of support that are crucial to giving students clarity and a vision of quality when crafting a product.



## [Fieldwork and Experts: The Branching Out Expedition](#)

Seventh-grade students engage in fieldwork and learn real-world schools as citizen-scientists.

## Farms and Food



## [Model Expedition Grade 1: Farms and Food](#)

Explore a Learning Expedition asking elementary schoolers to do research in their local community to understand how food gets from farm to table.

### Life in a Vernal Pool



## [Model Expedition Grade 7: Life in a Vernal Pool](#)

Explore an overview of a Learning Expedition asking middle schoolers to conduct scientific research at a local vernal pool.

### The Human Face of Human Rights



## [Model Expedition Grade 10: The Human Face of Human Rights](#)

Explore a Learning Expedition asking high schoolers to uncover and document the stories of immigrants in their community.

### EL Education

#### Fieldwork Overview

Students in EL Education schools learn from fieldwork, experts, and service in addition to learning from text. They use the natural and social environments of their communities as sites for purposeful fieldwork and service connected to academic work. Students working in the field are active investigators using the research tools, techniques of inquiry, and standards of presentation used by professionals in the field. Schools develop procedures and protocols to ensure that fieldwork is safe and productive. In addition to having students conduct research outside the school, teachers bring experts from the community into the classroom. These experiences maximize students' motivation to learn.

#### Uses and Purposes of Fieldwork

In EL Education schools, we do fieldwork for multiple purposes and understand that different fieldwork opportunities have different levels of impact on learning:

- The fieldwork is intended to investigate students as to collect data relevant to the content and

## [Fieldwork Overview](#)

This document outlines the purpose and organization of fieldwork.

### EL Education

#### Using Experts in the Classroom

##### How to use experts:

- To enhance a topic
- To expand students' understanding of real-world applications of knowledge
- As examples of lifelong learners
- To collect data

##### Prep students

- Preview questions and protocols
- Use KWL Charts
- Prepare some career questions
- Discuss appropriate behavior and consequences

## [Using Experts in the Classroom](#)

This document lists how to find and use experts, including how to manage the experience from start to finish.



## [Kindergarteners as Experts](#)

Young students at an Idaho school share their learning with families and professional experts using song, high-quality artwork, and research.



## [Students Share Work that Matters with an Authentic Audience](#)

Students, teachers, families, and community members celebrate learning at a culminating event for a middle school Learning Expedition.



## [Why Use a Standards-Based Grading System?](#)

Observe a parent, a student, a teacher, and a principal discuss the benefits and logistics of a standards-based grading system.

### EL Education

#### The Who, What and Why of Standards-Based Grading

Excerpt from *Leaders of Their Own Learning*

What Do Teachers Do?	What Do Students Do?	What's the Result?
Work collaboratively with	N/A	The school's grading system.

## [The Who, What and Why of Standards-Based Grading](#)

This resource outlines how teachers and students implement standards-based grading as well as the result of their efforts.



## [Middle school Student-Led Conference](#)

Watch a seventh-grade student discuss her academic progress with her father at a Student-Led Conference.



## [Students Own Their Progress](#)

Sixth-grade students

### EL Education

#### The Who, What and Why of Student-Led Conferences

Excerpt from *Leaders of Their Own Learning*

Table 5.2 The Who, What and Why of Student-Led Conferences

What Do Teachers Do?	What Do Students Do?	What's the Result?

## [The Who, What and Why of Student-Led Conferences](#)



## [Passage Presentations in Secondary Schools](#)

showcase how they use homework and test data to focus their studies and improve their skills.



The Who, What and Why of Portfolios and Passage Presentations  
Excerpt from *Leaders of Their Own Learning*

What Do Teachers Do?	What Do Students Do?	What's the Result?
Define a clear purpose and ongoing structure for portfolios that is linked to learning targets and state and Common Core standards.	Understand that each lesson and learning activity is connected to learning targets and that their portfolios will document their progress in meeting those targets.	Students meet standards and have greater engagement and ownership of learning. Students use their portfolios as a body of evidence for achievement.

## [The Who, What and Why of Passage Presentations](#)

This resource outlines how teachers and students implement Passage Presentations as well as the result of their efforts.



## [Crew Culture](#)

See a school-based example of a school community embodying Crew Culture.

This resource outlines how teachers and students implement Student-Led Conferences as well as the result of their efforts.

## Core Practice 23 [Building the Culture and Structure of Crew](#)

In the EL Education model, the tradition of Crew is both a culture and a structure. The term "crew" comes from educator Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound. Hahn's quote "We are crew, not passengers, strengthened by acts of consequential service to others" inspired the EL Education motto, "We are crew." The culture of crew impacts all members of a school community to work together in a team, to pitch in, to help others. Staff and students help their colleagues and peers get up the mountain together—individual success is not enough. The structure of Crew—only meetings to support everyone's learning and growth—makes time for students to build meaningful relationships with peers and their Crew leader, to reflect on and monitor academic progress, and to focus on character development. Crew is also an engine for equity and inclusion, a place where all students feel they belong and can succeed. Crew leaders strategically plan Crew meetings to address and assess these multiple goals.

## [Build the Culture and Structure of Crew](#)

This document walks through the steps for building both the culture and structure of Crew.



## [Crew—A Structure for Support](#)

Explore the structure of daily or weekly Crew meetings that help students reflect on their growth as scholars and as people.

See examples of Passage Presentations across several schools as students reflect on their readiness to move to the next phase of their education.



## Purposes of Crew

An EL Education school culture is planned for, developed, and sustained through practices that bring the community together, promote shared understandings, and encourage all community members to become crew, not passengers. Students in EL schools are known well and supported by adults. In EL Education schools, each student is known well by at least one adult within the school. One structure for developing this relationship—and supporting students socially, emotionally, and academically—is crew.

The structure of crew allows for relationship building, academic readiness monitoring, and character

## [Purposes of Crew](#)

Explore detailed explanations of the varied content and purposes of Crew.

## Core Practices

A Vision for Improving Schools

## [Core Practices](#)

This document contains all 38 Core Practices of the EL Education whole-school model.

MATHEMATICA  
Policy Research



## Evaluation of Expeditionary Learning Middle Schools

Expeditionary Learning  
(EL) Schools



Educators are seeking ways to help students develop the broad range of competencies covered by the new Common Core standards and assessments. The Expeditionary Learning (EL) model, which operates in more than 100 schools in 30 states, provides an interdisciplinary curriculum for students and professional development services for

## [Mathematica Policy Research Evaluation of EL Middle Schools](#)

This education brief outlines key findings from a 2013 impact study.



## Attachment 4: EL Education Credentialing Overview

EL Education partners with schools in our national network to raise student achievement through the strategic implementation of our Core Practices. All of our network school partners embrace EL's expanded definition of achievement, which contains three dimensions:

- Mastery of Knowledge and Skills
- Character
- High-Quality Work

The EL Credentialing Process is designed to support each school in tracking progress toward ambitious goals for student achievement and teacher practices and recognize the accomplishment of these goals.

### Three Dimensions of Student Achievement

All schools in the EL Education network set goals, track progress and build a body of evidence related to student achievement goals across three interrelated dimensions: **Mastery of Knowledge and Skills, Character and High-Quality Work.** EL Education and our school partners share accountability for candidate results in each of these

## [Credentialing Overview](#)

Pages 16-18 of this document outline the process EL Education schools must take to become Credentialed Schools.