

CASE STUDY

 Education



EL Education



Year established:
1991



Goal:

Increase student engagement and achievement by focusing on mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-quality student work.



Impact:

EL Education supports a network of 150 pre-K-12 public schools in 30 states and has launched an open source K-8 English language arts curriculum that has been downloaded more than 10 million times across 45 states. After three years of attending a school in the EL Education network, students gain an average of seven months in reading achievement and 10 months in math achievement. Teachers who participated in EL Education's professional development program aligned with its curriculum significantly improved their instructional practices after one year, and after two years saw positive effects on student achievement.



Change strategy:

(1) Introduces a positive disruption by focusing on changing how teachers teach, rather than simply the material that they cover in class. (2) Focuses on the “whole learner” by infusing character throughout all facets of the model, and explicitly through small groups of students called Crews in its school model. (3) Fosters supportive relationships among educators by bringing them together in training institutes and other forums to work collaboratively in implementing its school model and curriculum.

Helping Teachers to Foster Learning and Build Character

By Lija Farnham and Emma Nothmann

“Schools ask us to come in and focus time and attention on kids,” says Ron Berger, chief academic officer of EL Education, a national nonprofit with a 25-year track record of inspiring teachers and students to achieve more than they thought possible. “And we tell them, it’s not just about kids; it’s about us as adults. Our vision of building student character is predicated on a school culture that changes how adults interact with each other and with kids.”

EL Education, originally called Expeditionary Learning, grew out of a 1991 collaboration between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA.¹ From the outset, it created a whole-school transformation model that addresses every aspect of a school’s instructional program, culture, and leadership. “Kids in traditional schools sometimes act like they’re on a cruise ship, where they sit on deck and

¹ The Bridgespan Group has assisted EL Education with strategic planning.

Photo, above: Students and their teacher at Hollis Innovation Academy, an EL Education school in Atlanta, GA. Credit: EL Education

teachers bring them stuff to do,” Berger told the *Washington Post*. “We think of school more like a sailing schooner, where everybody, both kids and adults, are pitching in and swabbing the deck but also charting the course.”²

EL Education advocates a three-dimensional view of student achievement that puts character side-by-side with mastery of rigorous content and high quality work. That means teachers and school leaders must model a school-wide culture of respect and compassion, and prioritize social and emotional learning and supportive classroom environments, along with fostering high-quality academic learning.

Teachers and students pitch in to implement two core EL Education elements: “expeditionary learning” projects that involve small groups of students as active learners with teachers as their guides; and small groups of students called Crews who stick together throughout the school year and meet daily along with a teacher-adviser to support and challenge each other.

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EL EDUCATION

EL Education’s model helps teachers form a fuller picture of each student so they can better support them socially, emotionally, and academically. Crew teams are the key to making this happen. These small groups usually meet for at least a half hour a day and typically remain together as the students move from grade to grade. Teachers, and sometimes administrators, serve as Crew leaders. The leaders’ effectiveness does not come from subject matter expertise, and the focus isn’t on assignments. Rather, it is about building strong, lasting relationships with students that help them persevere through challenging tasks and adversity in school and life. At its best, Crew isn’t confined to a 30-minute block. Rather, it embodies the spirit of camaraderie, teamwork, and authenticity that needs to underlie all the interactions in the school building every day.

The school model works. Research by Mathematica has shown that after three years of attending a school in the EL Education network, students gain an average of seven months in reading achievement and 10 months in math achievement.³ They outperform their peers in the district on state tests, with the greatest gains for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students.

Over more than two decades, EL Education has built its network to 150 pre-K-12 public schools in more than 30 states. To join, at least 40 percent of a school’s students must come from low-income families. The intensive, in-person training and coaching required for these partnerships, and the expense for participating schools, limit further growth.

2 Chris Berdik, “What if personalized learning was less about me and more about us?” *The Hechinger Report*, December 23, 2018, <https://hechingerreport.org/what-if-personalized-learning-was-less-about-me-and-more-about-us/>.

3 Ira Nichols-Barrer and Joshua Haimson, *Impacts of Five Expeditionary Learning Middle Schools on Academic Achievement*, Mathematica Policy Research, July 8, 2013, <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/impacts-of-five-expeditionary-learning-middle-schools-on-academic-achievement>.

To spread its approach, EL Education launched an open-source K-8 English language arts curriculum that has been downloaded more than 10 million times across 45 states. The lessons “bake in a focus on collaboration, character, and personalization in terms of kids showing evidence of their own learning,” said Berger in a *Hechinger Report* article.⁴ Teachers serve as coaches and facilitators of learning, different from a traditional instruction-centric model with a teacher lecturing at the front of the classroom. In fact, 80–90 percent of the curriculum is comprised of teacher guides, versus the typical worksheets and assignments.⁵

Because EL Education is so focused on changing how teachers teach, rather than simply the material that they cover in class, it requires a fundamentally different approach. Accordingly, the organization provides teachers at its new network schools—those engaging in a multiyear, whole-school transformation—several months of professional development, plus classroom coaching by EL Education master teachers. Teachers and school leaders also participate in an intensive, three-day “action institute” to prepare them for EL Education’s approach. For districts and schools using the open-source curriculum, EL Education offers on-site professional development modeled after the approach developed to support whole-school transformation.

“These materials look and feel very different than materials we’ve used in the past,” says April Imperio, executive director of K-12 Literacy with the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), which began using the language arts curriculum in 2018 in all of its K-8 classrooms. In Detroit, as it does in many other communities where it supports



Students at Harborside Academy, an EL Education school in Kenosha, WI. Credit: EL Education

4 Berdik, “What if personalized learning was less about me and more about us?”

5 You can see EL Education’s curriculum on its website, <https://curriculum.eleducation.org>.

implementation, EL Education partnered with district leaders to plan and organize a multiday comprehensive teacher institute prior to the beginning of the school year. EL Education and the district continue to partner, providing ongoing professional learning, coaching, and other direct supports to help teachers and schools manage the technical and adaptive changes associated with implementing the new instructional materials.

While emphasizing how much excitement there has been among DPSCD teachers about the curriculum, Imperio is also candid about the challenges. “The other side of all the excitement is the anxiety that comes along with change for school leaders and teachers. You’re coming up against years of work implementing other curricula that did not align to the rigor of the standards. Teachers have been wondering—will this work?”

A teacher in Detroit told Amy Bailey, EL’s managing director of district partnerships, “I’m scared, I don’t know if I can do this.” Bailey has heard this kind of doubt from teachers across the country and views the questioning and uncertainty as a step toward change. “Teachers often report that initially when they look at the curriculum, they believe it’s too hard for their students,” Bailey continues. “But as they see the changes in their students, and students feel it, the classroom environment starts to shift. When you walk into a classroom where implementation is moving forward, the change is palpable.”

A report from Mathematica found that English language arts teachers who participated in EL Education’s professional development program aligned with its curriculum significantly improved their instructional practices after one year.⁶ This is true for both new and veteran teachers—demonstrating the potential of this kind of professional development to transform teacher practice. And after two years, the program had positive effects on students’ English language arts achievement.

From the beginning, EL Education understood that fostering student character development starts with teachers and school leaders modeling collaborative and supportive relationships with each other. This approach stands in sharp contrast to character building programs that focus exclusively on students. This process starts in the off-site teacher institute and continues through EL Education’s ongoing coaching and supports for curriculum implementation. Facilitators model collaboration norm setting and actively reinforce the norms through the interactions they have with teachers in regular professional development. These touch points vary according to the needs and structures of a particular district or school. Some schools use a master teacher structure

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6 Sarah Dolfin et al., *Evaluation of the Teacher Potential Project*, Mathematica, June 28, 2019, <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/evaluation-of-the-teacher-potential-project>.

to ensure regular coaching, while others carve out weekly collaborative planning times. It's important to get it right, says Bailey. "There is always a direct relationship between how much growth students experience and how much adults are modeling these qualities of respect, responsibility, courage, and kindness."

The DPSCD teacher institute modeled collaborative behavior by having teachers and school leaders learn side-by-side. Later in the school year, EL Education worked with the district to bring the principals back together for two days "to talk about what we're hearing and learning from teachers and how we can better support teachers in continued quality literacy instruction," says Imperio.

It's still early days for Detroit's transition to EL Education's curriculum, but already Imperio notices important changes. "In our previous program, we used basal readers that were quite antiquated," she explains. "Now the kids are excited about reading really high-quality novels and nonfiction articles—and engaging in conversations about them." One seventh grader's encounter with the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Beth Gonzalez, illustrates the point. When asked how he liked the new materials, the boy volunteered how his class had been assigned to read a few chapters in a novel. "Don't tell my teacher," the boy said, "but last night, I read the whole book."

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AMY BAILEY, MANAGING DIRECTOR,
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