

pioneering

ISSUE 41 • SEPTEMBER 7, 2017 • EDUCATION REIMAGINED

A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Executive Director

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Hello Pioneers,

This has been an unsettling week with Hurricane Harvey hitting Houston and Irma on its way to Puerto Rico and Florida. We have been in touch with the pioneers we know in Houston and surrounding areas and have, thankfully, heard that everyone has weathered the storm. But, their communities are now in need of our support.

If you and/or your learners are interested in helping Houston ISD, they are calling for children's clothes of all sizes (clean and in reasonably good repair), school uniforms, and school supplies. They can be sent to this address:

HISD Harvey Recovery
c/o Delmar Stadium
2020 Mangum
Houston, TX 77092

HISD also has a foundation set up for donations, which can be found [here](#). And, if you are looking for other ways to contribute, NPR has a helpful list of different ways donations can be made [here](#).

As the climate changes and we face new global crises, it is a reminder of the complex challenges our world is facing today. It also has me thinking about the creativity, empathy, courage, and generosity we and our young people need to nurture and prize. So often, it is in these all-too-important arenas that young people actually have way more to teach us, than we them. Asking questions of learners and engaging them in solutions is one of the most rewarding experiences for both young and old. This is a time to engage and wonder together about what can be done. A time to build community and imagine a new future.

In this issue, discover how one Texas district did just that. They took a tragedy and used it as a time to reevaluate how they could best support their learners to be safe and fulfilled. Also, read about Eagle Rock School's amazing community of learners and the role nature plays in kicking off their transformational journeys.

We hope these stories uplift and inspire us to use our surroundings and circumstances—however dire—to build stronger, more resilient, and joyful communities.

Thank you for all you do!

Warm wishes,
Kelly Young



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Published by Education Reimagined,
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Connect. Share. Discover. Lead.

We seek to accelerate the growth of the movement dedicated to transforming education in America. We invite those excited and interested by the possibility of learner-centered education to discover more, join a growing movement, and begin a journey to make this a reality in diverse communities across the country.





EAGLE ROCK SCHOOL

ESTES PARK, CO

“Unlike many schools, Eagle Rock dedicates time and energy toward personal growth using $8 + 5 = 10$ as a powerful set of values.” — FAITH KROMA, EAGLE ROCK GRADUATE

NESTLED AWAY IN THE MOUNTAINS OF ESTES PARK, COLORADO, a “final chance,” residential learning environment is reimagining what it means to educate young learners. And, they have been doing so since 1993. With only 72 learners in attendance at any given time, Eagle Rock School prides itself on accepting learners who “demonstrate a passion and motivation to actively pursue intellectual and personal growth, and attain personal achievement outside the classroom.”

Every Eagle Rock learner begins their educational journey on a 24-day wilderness expedition that sets the tone for their entire learning experience. It is meant to demonstrate the importance of community and how much more can be accomplished through the combined strengths of their peers. And, during the expedition’s final week, learners are tasked with battling the elements on their own. By pursuing the simple goal of survival with just their own brains and wit, learners must grapple with the limitations and presumptions they’ve made about their abilities and potential—often informed by a past full of impalpable experiences—and create brand new headspace for a reimagined future.

The wilderness expedition permeates every aspect of Eagle Rock School. When facing a difficult task on their learning journey, learners reflect on the adversity they overcame during those 24 days—feeling uncomfortable, experiencing failure, unsure what the next step is—and use it as motivation to push forward and reach their goals. This cultivation of their internal drive creates in them a strong sense of **learner agency**. And, Eagle Rock’s model allows that agency to grow exponentially.

As a residential learning environment, learners live in co-ed housing where each **socially embedded** family unit teams up to democratically create basic household rules, divvy up responsibilities (e.g. chores), and establish social meetings. These units create an atmosphere where learners can, possibly for the first time in their lives, “feel safe, emotionally nourished, and comfortable.”

With this newfound safety, learners enter their more formal learning experiences mentally charged to prove what they’re capable of. Eagle Rock learning is designed to be **personalized, relevant, and contextualized**, set on a **competency-based** foundation. This allows learners to navigate the winding roads of any learning challenge with their interests and passions at the forefront and at a pace optimized for their learning needs.

Learning is a 24/7 adventure at Eagle Rock. From the wilderness expedition, to the residential life component, to the more formal learning spaces, every minute of every day is an opportunity to further develop one’s **knowledge, skills, and dispositions**. By creating a culture founded on the belief that anyone and everyone can realize their potential, Eagle Rock School is proving every child can become successful, lifelong learners when met where they are and provided the supports necessary to become agents in their learning.

LEARN MORE

[Day in the Life of a Student](#)

[Meet the Eagle Rock Grad Who Sailed 27,000 Miles Solo](#)

[Getting Smart – On School Leadership: Mindsets For Visionary Leaders](#)

FACTS & FIGURES

72 learners from across the nation

15-21-year-old learners

Residential

Year-round

Tuition-free independent school

100% of learners were labeled disengaged high school-aged youth before enrolling

Professional Development Center supports hundreds of like-minded schools and organizations around the country

Corporate social responsibility initiative of American Honda Motor Company

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A Conversation with Jeff Liddle



JEFF LIDDLE

Q. Over the course of your career, what roads led you to Eagle Rock School?

A. Growing up, I went to a public high school, then went to Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania. I didn't want to go to college. I lost my father when I was 15 and was adrift in knowing what I wanted to do with my life, but my mom talked me into trying college for a semester. I had always been really interested in the outdoors, and I associated college with sitting at a desk, so I had a hard time imagining there would be any value in that. But, when I went to Slippery Rock, I took a class in Resource Management and Parks and Recreation. All of a sudden, a new world opened up for me about what I could do with my life.

I eventually met Paul Petzoldt, the first chief instructor of Outward Bound in the U.S. and the founder of the National Outdoor Leadership School. I had a conversation with him when he visited and spoke at Slippery Rock, and he invited me to come to Wyoming to do an internship with the Wilderness Education Association for the summer.

My life continued to unfold in really interesting ways as I explored outdoor leadership and leading wilderness trips. After my internship in Wyoming, I came back to Slippery Rock, graduated, and got my first job working with adjudicated youth in Georgia in a wilderness program that acted as an alternative to lockup. Three years of that introduced me to the reality that there is a whole slice of this country that is underserved, misunderstood, and has so much potential and value if given the right context, environment, and support.

I went ahead and pursued a graduate degree with a focus on outdoor and experiential education and management. From that first trip to Wyoming until I landed at Eagle Rock, I spent 17 years working in some form of outdoor education context. Over those years, my experience as an outdoor and experiential educator grew, as well as my expertise in guiding character and leadership development.

When I came to Eagle Rock, I ran the Wilderness Program for five years—a 24-day, new student wilderness orientation course that happens at the beginning of every trimester. This position is what originally brought me to Eagle Rock, but what really drew me to the organization was this idea that a wilderness program could fit inside the context of a school. That doesn't occur often, and I found a great deal of interest in that. I would work with these students for 24 days in the field, and then I would have another couple of years with them back at the school to see their growth and development. Most other outdoor programs sort of stand on their own. You take their course and go back to wherever you're going.

The other piece that inspired me was Eagle Rock's Professional Development Center. We not only want to serve the 72 students on our campus really well, but we also want to have a bigger impact around the country. That was really intriguing to me. I was at a point in my career where I wanted to be working with young people but with a bigger impact. It always seemed this was an either-or dilemma. You're either working for an association where you're putting on conferences and creating professional development experiences

but not working with young people; or, you're working with young people and not having this broader impact. Eagle Rock had both.

I eventually became the Director of Curriculum, a position I held for seven years. Using my experience as the Wilderness Lead, I wanted to find a way to integrate the skills and lessons learned on the expeditions with the academic curriculum in a more holistic way. The curriculum at Eagle Rock started out really innovative when it opened in 1993, but it started to drift toward a more traditional framework. When I took over as Director of Curriculum, we revamped the curriculum and reorganized it around our original values. We changed our daily schedule to allow for larger chunks of time, so our learners could do more field- and service-oriented work in the community.

For the last five years, I've acted as the Head of School, which puts me in charge of the school and the professional development center.

Q. Can you share more about how Eagle Rock School's curriculum has shifted over time?

A. We have a set of values captured in the phrase, **8+5=10**. The eight stands for the themes that guide our design, the five for the expectations we organize our curriculum around, and the ten for the commitments learners are living out through their experience at Eagle Rock. So, it was those five expectations that originally guided our curriculum design. When you looked at our graduation requirements, you had to earn credit in effective communications, making healthy life choices, practicing leadership for justice, being an engaged global citizen, and developing an expanding knowledge base. That's how you graduated. Baked inside was your math, science, and English, but that wasn't front and center.

These graduation requirements are core to our Individualized Learning Plan (ILP). Over time, as the ILP framework went through multiple revisions, the traditional disciplines became more prevalent. Rather than the five expectations operating in the foreground as intended, they took a backseat to the siloed subjects. Eventually, the five expectations stopped showing up on the ILP altogether. Everything was grouped by math, science, history, etc. The courses were still operating in an interdisciplinary fashion, but they didn't have our values. It was morphing toward this discipline-centric orientation. That made it harder and harder to operate with an integrated curriculum.

Students felt they were simply taking math class or science class, rather than feeling like they were learning some overarching concept that required them to draw on different disciplines in a natural way. One of the things we started to see was students getting hung up on the idea they didn't like math, and that barrier would cause them to up and leave because they couldn't get the number of math portfolios needed to graduate. They weren't as engaged because the curriculum wasn't as integrated or innovative.

I think one of the big things in our shift back to focusing on the five expectations was that the instructors felt like the things they wanted to do—and felt the student wanted to do—were no longer possible. Given the traditional route the curriculum had begun to take, they had to get through all of this “stuff.” We were able to resurface our five expectations and re-emphasize the holistic nature of our curriculum through the support of the instructors and students.

In terms of how this shift away began in the first place, I wasn't at Eagle Rock while it was happening, so I can only speak to what I've been told. What I've understood is that each time a revision was made to the ILP, it was like the House of Representatives—everyone wanted to add one more item from their discipline. This caused an inflation of the checkboxes that needed to be filled in throughout the year and a move away from our work to create a holis-

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tic experience for the students. I think this is a natural occurrence in many alternative or progressive environments. I think a lot of people who are drawn to progressive education are drawn to it from a philosophical perspective. But, they have been successful in a traditional environment. The longer they're in an environment like that, the more their professional insecurity grows when they begin facing questions they don't necessarily have the answers to.

When you have this predominant paradigm that tells you to organize your curriculum by discipline, using scope and sequence, you develop a belief that if you don't do that, your students are going to die. When push comes to shove and you're in uncharted territory, you tend to gravitate toward what you know. I think many innovative schools that start out really cutting edge get fearful over time and ask themselves if they might need to pull back and reimplement old techniques.

It's important to note this is a slow drift. You don't wake up one day and say you're going to throw everything out and go back to the traditional framework. Rather, you do a tweak here and a tweak there and before you know it, you take a step back and go, "Whoa, what happened?"

Q. What is the long-term impact of the wilderness expedition learners embark on as their introduction to Eagle Rock School?

A. It's fundamental in a way. I always tell people, I can't imagine this piece of Eagle Rock ever going away. I can almost see every other aspect shifting or changing but not the expedition. One reason for this is the fact that we get our students from all over the country. They are disengaged, and the schools that served them did not serve them well. That can be for a whole host of reasons—the individual student and their learning style might be incongruent with sitting in a classroom; it could mean the student is growing up in a family system that is not conducive to them being successful in school; or, it could even mean the student is in a school that is poorly performing even by traditional standards. Also, some of our students have experience in the juvenile justice system, having engaged in criminal activity or participated in using drugs and alcohol. The students at Eagle Rock come from a host of backgrounds, creating a diverse mix of experience, race, culture, and gender.

All of these students show up at Eagle Rock with all the coping skills that have helped them survive whatever context they've been in. And, those coping strategies aren't usually conducive to living in an intentional, residential community. It can be a real mess when they show up—they're struggling and acting out in ways that can be dysfunctional for the community.

So, we go out for 24 days on the course to help strip away all their external influences. If we only had a one-week expedition, students would be able to hold up their facade and not embrace their vulnerability. That won't happen during a 24-day period. At some point, we're going to get the real deal from you. We're going to get to know who you really are, and you're going to have to be vulnerable and open up in a way that allows you to shift your behavior. By the time you're done with that course, you're not just exposed to some new ways of thinking; instead, you've had a chance to work through what you came in with in a productive, positive way.

For the expedition, we'll have eight young people in the middle of the wilderness, and they have to figure out how to work together in order to travel on the course. It's a skill-building oriented program, so we do a lot of work around effective communication, conflict resolution, and restorative practices to help them understand how to take responsibility for their actions and how to interact with people in a way that helps them sort things out. We believe conflict can be generative, and when it comes up, if you lean

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into it and utilize the skills we teach, you can generate a new future you couldn't have imagined when that conflict first arose.

Overall, we get students comfortable being uncomfortable. We get them comfortable as learners, being vulnerable, and taking responsibility for their own lives. I believe all of those things are critical for them to come to Eagle Rock and be successful. It gives them 24 days to create a frame of reference. They will refer back to their experiences on the course all the time when they're at school.

For example, many of our students like to blame other people for their shortcomings. Wilderness has such a clear, natural, and logical consequence built into the experience that students discover pretty quickly that they can't blame anybody if they didn't listen to how to put the tarp up when it rained and they got wet. This makes sense, right? But, there are so many arbitrary things in the world, and rules that don't make sense to them, that they develop this habit of not taking responsibility.

Oftentimes, there's some legitimacy to thinking the system is working against you. At Eagle Rock, we say, "You choose all of your own behaviors." You're not in control of the external circumstances of your life, but you are in control of how you respond to them. The wilderness trip really bakes all that in, which then facilitates their ownership of their learning when they're back in school. When they're struggling with something, we often ask, "What can you do to shift that? What is in your control that you can utilize to make your learning more yours?" The wilderness trip builds the foundation for that reflection to take place.

Q. How do you see this wilderness orientation being translatable to learning communities across the country that don't necessarily have access to something like an Estes Park?

A. We realized a number of years ago that we can't export Eagle Rock. We can't tell a school in Albuquerque, New Mexico that they ought to be doing a 24-day wilderness expedition—let us help you design that. We're so different, and in the early days, it caused people to easily discount our work, saying, "Oh, of course you can do that. You have this, that, and the other thing." It was too easy for people to write us off.

We took a step back and asked: "What are the paradigms working in community change models?" What we found was you have to listen more than you tell, build on what assets exist in that community, and support those organizations with their own goals inside their own contexts.

We became focused on being context-specific, asset-based change facilitators more so than a group that says, "Let us help you adopt our model." When we partner with an organization, we will make sure there's alignment around a few things. The organization must show an aspiration to develop a progressive learning framework, and they must serve a demographic similar to what we serve. We like to work with larger networks, like **Big Picture Learning**. With so many deserving, underserved communities, these filters allow us to narrow our focus and make the largest impact we can.

Having said all that, if a school came to us and said, "We're really interested in taking your wilderness program and integrating it into our experience here, help us with that," we would do that. But, we would begin with the community's assets and see what already exists that would make this program possible. Something like helping form a partnership with an outdoor organization that already exists in the community and helping develop a curriculum around their program.

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When this isn't an option, which is often the case, we look at the principles that capture the essence of the wilderness program and seek out multiple assets in the community that, when combined, can cultivate the full experience. For example, we might find an organization that offers a two-day ropes course experience that can get the wheels churning in incorporating that kind of experience into the curriculum.

Overall, our real motivation is to help communities discover ways to orient young people to their school where they learn how to take risks and be vulnerable within a safe environment. That's the bottom line of what the wilderness course is looking to accomplish.

Q. What's a story from your experience at Eagle Rock that captures the possibility available to learners who live and learn there?

A. If I were to tell a story that captured the idea that who a young person is at a single point in time is not necessarily indicative of who they're going to be, I would have to talk about Calvin King.

Calvin King was interviewed to attend Eagle Rock while in lockup. I should mention, I always hesitate to tell these stories because when I say "lockup," people's gut reaction is to think of our program as a place that is only serving students in the juvenile justice system. We certainly have young people who have been involved with the law, but everyone comes here by choice.

When Calvin came to Eagle Rock, you could tell he was very street-wise, very charismatic, and could work the system. He got into some discipline problems at Eagle Rock and was disenrolled. He went home for quite some time because, when you get suspended from Eagle Rock, it can be for up to a trimester or two. Calvin was likely home for six months before returning. When students are suspended, they have tasks they must complete before re-enrolling in our program. These tasks are specific to each student and the actions they've committed—it can range from getting a job, seeking counseling, etc.

Upon Calvin's return to Eagle Rock, we held a restorative circle to repair the harm he had caused through his actions. He was reintegrated into the community with a lot of hesitation from students and some staff. But, he reintegrated, eventually graduated, and received a full scholarship to Morehouse College in Atlanta. After he graduated from there, he came back to Eagle Rock as a Public Allies Teaching Fellow for two years. Then, he went to the Christina Seix Academy in Trenton, New Jersey, where they focus on serving underserved youth. Calvin is the Director of Residential Life at the Academy.

Calvin's story really captures what Eagle Rock is all about and this idea that what happens today does not predict what will happen tomorrow. In his words, if Eagle Rock hadn't shown up for him, he might not be alive right now. In his view, Eagle Rock saved his life in a lot of ways.

From our viewpoint, Eagle Rock showed up at the right time for him, and through our school, he was able to save his own life. It was a process. He didn't just show up, and it was all roses. He made some mistakes, we stuck with each other, and now he's an amazing person doing amazing things—serving Trenton youth.

We talk with all of our staff about this, particularly in instances when someone has convinced themselves a student will not be able to succeed here. We come back to that idea. We have to remind ourselves that what has happened in this moment is not predictive of what could be in a few years.

“...who a young person is at a single point in time is not necessarily indicative of who they're going to be.”

JEFF LIDDLE

Jeff Liddle is responsible for leading Eagle Rock's community and leadership team. In this role, he regularly interfaces with Eagle Rock's board of directors and is responsible for overseeing the vision and financial health of Eagle Rock School.

A product of public schooling, Jeff has been working with adolescents as they find their way in life for the past three decades, first as a YMCA camp trip leader in the hills of western Pennsylvania and for seven years (2005-2012) as Eagle Rock's director of curriculum, where he was responsible for all aspects of our school's academic programs.



A VOICE FROM THE FIELD

School Transformation from the Heart

by Kevin Brown, Superintendent of Alamo Heights Independent School District

In today's traditional education system, it is easy for educators and parents alike to lose focus on what is most important. As a nation, we are addicted to high-stakes testing, grade point averages, and class rank. This makes it easy to forget our real purpose: to help young people grow and develop into honest, kind, and compassionate citizens.

Academic success has always been a major focus in the Alamo Heights district, but in 2008, we made an important expansion to our priorities. Resting on the laurels of our district's academic accomplishments was no longer enough. Our community wanted more for its children. Acknowledging and acting on this, we engaged 252 people in our community to develop a brand new Strategic Plan.

As the plan was being drafted, our community's eyes were opened to a heart-wrenching reality. Two of our students tragically died in alcohol- and drug-related situations, while two other children in the surrounding community died from similar issues. We could not ignore the challenges facing our students.

A social-emotional wellness component was already present in the strategic plan, and due to these events, this intention became an even more significant focus. In what is considered a very safe community and environment, we knew we couldn't ignore the threat Alamo Heights and its children were facing. Among six other major objectives, the Strategic Plan called for us to "aggressively confront the social and emotional issues of our community." It also gave several recommendations about how to approach these issues.

Coincidentally, a support group of five moms, whose children had varying levels of addiction issues, asked to meet me privately. They shared heartbreaking stories about their children and expressed interest in how we might be willing to address these issues for all students. They handed me a list of recommendations that was almost identical to those created by our community in the strategic plan. It was a powerful moment as we put the lists side-by-side, realizing we were allies. These moms saw they didn't have to meet in private anymore, and they asked how they could help.

BUILDING THE SUPPORT NETWORK

Through a three-month fundraising effort put on by these moms and our school foundation, we were able to hire a counselor to address issues strictly related to alcohol and drugs. The position has since been permanently endowed, and the counselor's role has expanded to have impact on all our campuses. Fortunately, we hired the perfect person to fill this position, and since then, the culture around keeping children healthy has significantly changed.



KEVIN BROWN

The program began with what were billed as **“Kitchen Table Talks.”** With the idea that most big family issues are discussed at the kitchen table, our gifted counselor, Michelli Ramon, spoke to parent groups and offered herself as a resource to facilitate a conversation in their homes with other parents. She would be invited by parents to sit with them AND the parents of their children’s friends. Mrs. Ramon would facilitate a conversation between multiple families to help them discover and define what expectations they wanted to set together related to the use of alcohol or drugs. For instance, parents might agree they would not serve alcohol to minors and would contact each other if they thought their children were stepping out of line. These expectations were different for every group, and in the end, it was about them building friends and allies in the challenging job of parenting.

The main function of each parent group was to be in constant communication with each other and their respective children, to have honest conversations about the challenges that come up in each unique parenting situation, and to never provide alcohol for each other’s children. In the first year, there were more than 30 of these Kitchen Table Talks, each helping to create a micro-community of parents supporting one another to prevent drug and alcohol abuse by their children.

The next major initiative was a series of **“Breaking the Silence”** meetings. In our community, one of the issues we identified was the unwritten code of silence we adhered to when it came to conversations about addiction. No one would talk about why Johnny wasn’t at school for a month. In fact, rather than directly saying Johnny was in rehab, stories would be told about Johnny taking a family trip or transferring to a private school.

Breaking the Silence meetings, open to our entire community in the evenings, looked to address this avoidance through featured speakers who would open up about how they overcame an addiction or related issue. Through these heart-wrenching, vulnerable, and powerful meetings, these speakers were adding to the increased awareness we were building across our community. At first, we only had speakers from outside our community, but soon, we had our own community members step up to tell their stories. We knew we would not be able to tackle drug and alcohol issues until we made it safe to talk about them in a public manner. These events provided the perfect avenue.

In addition to these two major initiatives, we held community-wide book studies and brought in powerful speakers, like Dr. Brene Brown, who visited us twice. Mrs. Ramon, our counselor, also created a strong culture of sobriety among those in recovery. For the past few years, we have had daily AA meetings at our high school. If a student celebrates a month or year of sobriety, sometimes I am called upon to distribute chips to celebrate their accomplishment. The entire family is there, and many tears of joy are shed.

The impact this has had on our community of young learners, both those in need of help and in general, has been profound. Our learners have been empowered to intervene when there are problems, supporting one another by standing up to them. One of my favorite stories relates to our former swim team captain. He had heard Mrs. Ramon speak to a group of students about warning signs of addiction. He believed he might have a teammate with a problem. With the support of the counselor, they approached the teammate’s parents about the concern, and then, in partnership with a few other teammates, they had an intervention when the young man came home. It was a tough night, but the young man was able to face his own addiction. He went to rehab, which quite possibly saved his life. There are far too many stories like this, but they have been affirming to the work.

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KEVIN BROWN

Today, we still have children who use and abuse alcohol and drugs, but more than anything, we have a drug solution, not a drug problem. We have incredible support and recovery efforts that truly save lives, and the work continues to inspire me.

ALIGNING WITH OUR COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

Within all of this positive work, we needed to identify the underlying issues that were causing children to drink or abuse alcohol in our community. In such an academically competitive environment as ours, anxiety and depression can be prevalent among many of our young learners. Often, our children are overscheduled in sports leagues, community service, church, and school activities. While these offer many great opportunities for children to pursue their passions and interests, sometimes there's too big a focus on building a resume and not enough on balancing the needs of the individual child.

To address this imbalance, we surveyed all children in grades 7, 9, and 11 with the [Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets Survey](#) to determine their most pressing needs. Using the survey results as our guide, we performed a program evaluation of our entire PK-12 counseling services using an outside evaluator. We completely aligned the work we do with the needs of our children. Now, our counselors meet monthly, collaborating on great projects that focus on student wellness. They have reached out to the surrounding medical community as well, collaborating with pediatricians and mental health professionals regularly to keep the lines of communication open when serving children.

REEVALUATING WHAT WE ARE ASKING OF LEARNERS

One example of where we took specific action was around the issue of homework. Excessive homework was identified as one of the culprits of over-stressed children during our community-wide strategic planning process. We realized homework was not always intentionally designed to be engaging. Sometimes we would see an assignment with 40 math problems, when 10 would suffice. Of course, homework is one of those topics where ten different people will have ten different opinions, but we tried to get a community consensus on how much and what type of homework is appropriate.

For instance, in preparing our guidelines, we started by asking how much sleep a child should get a night. Then, how much time is spent getting ready for school, eating, and actually going to school? How much free time should children have available when outside of our building? What about after-school practices and music lessons? All of these factors were considered for different age groups. We also reviewed the extensive (and fairly non-conclusive) research that is out there. So, after all the factors above were considered, how much time is left for homework?

Once those questions were answered, we asked ourselves questions about whether homework is actually needed, and if so, how can we be intentional about both the quantity and quality of it. Our homework guidelines are very important to us. We still assign homework, but we are much more intentional when doing so.

Also, when it comes to exams, we set up a testing calendar to avoid loading up tests all on one day. Each core subject matter is assigned a specific day throughout the week for when exams or major projects should occur. For instance, Social Studies and Math may be limited to Mondays and Thursdays, while Science and English get Tuesday or Wednesday.

By the way, since the inception of these guidelines, ACT scores have actually increased significantly. Although we don't necessarily attribute this increase to the guidelines, they certainly haven't hurt student learning.

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CREATING ENGAGING OPPORTUNITIES

There are many other ways we are addressing social and emotional issues. For instance, each week, every child engages in a 30-minute “class meeting.” In these meetings, the teacher leads the children through a discussion, reading, or activity related to a variety of topics. These age-appropriate experiences are developed by campus- and district-level committees. We often use outside resources, like Common Sense Media or youth suicide prevention programs—**Riding the Waves** in elementary and **Look, Listen and Link** at secondary. This allows us to have powerful conversations about important topics, such as empathy, mistreatment, finding your strengths, cyberbullying, and test anxiety.

We have also tried to rethink the way we offer a vast array of courses and experiences with the idea that they will engage children in school and reduce anxiety and depression. For instance, for PE, our learners can take Yoga or CrossFit. For science, they can take Forensic Science, Astronomy, or our famous Rocketry class. We have added more than 30 courses at the secondary level in response to student voice that count toward graduation. At the middle school level, four days a week students get to take a 30-minute mini-enrichment course of their choice. These include just about any topic you can imagine from computer coding to fly fishing to cooking. Every 3-6 weeks, learners get to choose a new mini-course, and you often see them so excited that they are running to class. They love these non-graded courses that are fun, low-stress, novel, and enriching.

AFFIRMING OUR STAFF AS LEARNERS

We completed all of the initiatives of our Strategic Plan in 2014, so in 2015, we developed a Profile of a Learner. This profile contains the characteristics and attributes we want for everyone in our district, including students, staff, and parents. One of the six major areas in our **Profile of a Learner** is: “Develop a Healthy Sense of Self.”

As a way of elevating the importance of this Profile, every month we highlight one or more teachers who exemplify a specific aspect of our Profile, since they are modeling this for our children. Whether they demonstrate creating positive relationships or showing humility or empathy, we affirm who they are by doing a video feature, honoring them at a school board meeting, and pushing out the video to our entire community. This is very well received and enhances the Profile in such a positive manner.

CLOSING

In the 21st Century, children have unprecedented opportunities academically, as well as in the arts, sports, and leadership. In our district, we still place a heavy emphasis on all of these areas. We have found, though, that our efforts in addressing the whole child have uniquely enhanced student success in every other area. In other words, we don’t see this as an “either-or” proposition but, rather, as a “both-and” one. Seeing it this way has enabled us to transform our schools to be much more learner-centered.

This work has taken courage and vulnerability, and it isn’t done yet. I have found that when we provide a safe environment for people of good will to have authentic conversations about what is best for our children, many great innovations bubble up and positive momentum is created. We have not only provided this safe space for conversations about social and emotional issues but also in every other facet of our district—academics, athletics, the arts, and leadership. Listening to students, parents, and staff—even when it is hard—is key to education transformation. I am incredibly optimistic about our future because we have demonstrated a long-term willingness to have those tough conversations and commit ourselves to continuous learning and improvement. It is embedded in our organizational culture. The journey has inspired us all, and the best is yet to come.

“Listening to students, parents, and staff—even when it is hard—is key to education transformation.”

KEVIN BROWN

Dr. Kevin Brown came to Alamo Heights ISD in July 2000 and has served as Superintendent of Schools since July 2008. He has successfully led the district through a community-wide collaborative strategic planning process and implementation, as well as collaboratively developed the AHISD Profile of a Learner to help transform the educational experience for children. He is immediate Past President of the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) and President of the Texas School Coalition. Alamo Heights ISD was named the Best Small School District in Texas in 2017.



The Hope Survey

When transforming to learner-centered practice, qualitative data becomes a crucial element in determining the needs of your learners. Unfortunately, given the traditional system's emphasis on easy to compare quantitative scores, qualitative data gathering tools are few and far between. However, as the learner-centered movement grows, new tools are being developed to meet the demand of educators nationwide. One such tool is **The Hope Survey**—a qualitative learner survey based on **hope theory**. The Hope Survey focuses on identifying where learners are based on “an assessment of generalized expectancy for achieving goals, which contains two components; motivation for pursuing goals and ability to identify workable routes to goal attainment.” The survey measures autonomy, belongingness, mastery goal orientation, and academic press (educators' high expectation of learners), which are all correlated with traditional academic achievement metrics but also correlate with learner's performance in life outside of traditional school walls. If you're wondering how to measure where your learners' motivation levels are sitting, The Hope Survey is a possible tool to explore.

Is the Survey Right for You? ([link](#))

What We're Measuring ([link](#))

Supporting Research ([link](#))

Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice

Whether they go up or down, the education conversation often begins and ends within the topic of numbers. Learner-centered educators know this numbers conversation is ignoring a variety of developmental aspects we should all be putting more energy into understanding. The **Students at the Center Hub** also recognized this need and wanted to gather and make accessible the wealth of research on what motivates kids (and adults) to perform their very best. In *Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice*, educators can gain new understanding on what can engage and motivate each of their learners based on the uniqueness of their being. And, they can develop learning strategies that are based on the needs of the individual, rather than on the calls for more numbers.

Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice ([link](#))

UPCOMING EVENTS

Mark your calendars! We will be speaking at some and hosting workshops at others. In all cases, pioneers will be front and center! Join us.

**INACOL SYMPOSIUM
PERSONALIZING LEARNING:
EQUITY, ACCESS, QUALITY**

Orlando, FL

Oct 23-25

[Symposium Website](#)

**8TH ANNUAL NATIONAL
CONVENING ON
PERSONALIZED LEARNING**

Milwaukee, WI

Oct 31-Nov 1

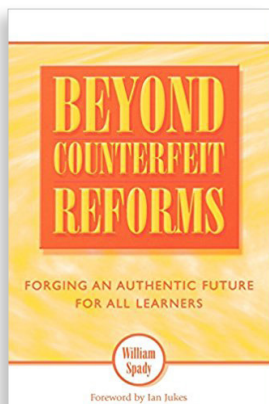
[Convening Website](#)

OPPORTUNITY BOARD

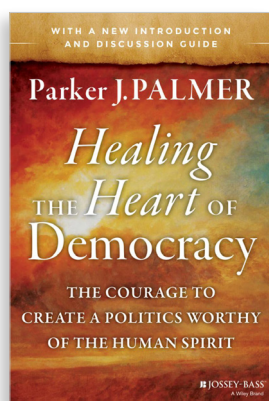
NEXT High School is accepting applications for **Pros**—Professional Educators—for the 2017-18 school year. Learn more and apply [here](#).

Summit Public Schools is looking for a **Director of Marketing**. Find out more and apply [here](#).

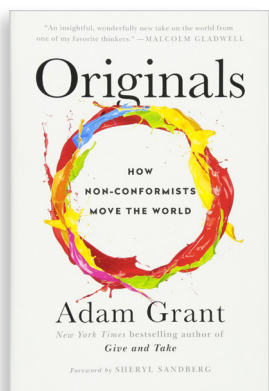
Want to join the **ReSchool Colorado** team? They are seeking an [Entrepreneur in Residence](#) and a [Learner Advocate](#).

**Beyond Counterfeit Reforms: Forging an Authentic Future for All Learners** by William Spady, Ian Jukes, and Ursula Ahern

When it comes to human behavior, there is a degree of irrationality that can become so dominant that it takes us on a crash course to the wrong conclusion. William Spady, Ian Jukes, and Ursula Ahern believe this idea may be exactly what has happened over the last century of education reform efforts. In their book, *Beyond Counterfeit Reforms*, they return to an often dormant topic of discussion—the learners. Looking at the traditional system, they simply ask, “Why do we do this?” Explore this question and more in this intentional text, and ask your own questions about what you believe is necessary in today’s world of educating our youth.

**Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit** by Parker J. Palmer

As education stakeholders, we sign on to a mission that often lies well outside our immediate job descriptions. Our work is centered on awakening the power of the human spirit—in our children, our colleagues, and ourselves. With this context operating in the background, it is a prerequisite to step outside the relatively narrow discussion of “education” and enter a discussion on what it means to create community, togetherness, and a positive culture. In Parker J. Palmer’s *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, he invites readers to reconnect with what it means to say “of the people, by the people, for the people.” And, with his insights, you may discover a new sense of empowerment within your daily work.

**Originals: How Nonconformists Move the World** by Adam M. Grant

Transformative work, by its nature, brings on a hard-to-quantify amount of risk. It forces us into a state of discomfort, not knowing what’s awaiting us on the other side. But, once we step up and accept this state of being, we begin seeing a future worth giving every second of our time to. Adam M. Grant, in his *New York Times* best-selling book, *Originals*, identified this characteristic through stories and studies that spanned a wide-array of industries. In his work, discover how you can step even further into the unknown with confidence and conviction.

WORTH YOUR TIME

Six Tips for Engaging Your Community in the Visioning Process

Conversations not only create culture—they sustain it. How do we involve communities and learners in the conversations that create the visions guiding our transformational work?

[Read here](#)

Personalized Learning with Matt & Courtney, “Do It from Day One!”

With a new academic year upon us, Matt and Courtney discuss the importance of not only what we tell learners about the year ahead but also how we tell them. [Listen here](#)

Shift Your Paradigm—Episodes 009-011

Jump back into the conversation about how the idea of leadership shifts in the learner-centered paradigm. Listen in to the most recent episodes to learn from leading pioneers from Mississippi, Colorado, and Virginia. [Listen here](#)

“We are a community of possibilities,
not a community of problems.”

— **PETER BLOCK**

Read past issues of
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www.education-reimagined.org



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