

Memoirs, River Journeys, and Life Without Bathing

Expeditionary learning puts the focus on student investigations -- and a Kansas City district embraces it.

by [Laura Scholes](#)

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This past winter, a bunch of seventh graders went 1,000 Years Without a Bath. OK, not literally, but the students at [King Middle School](#), in Portland, Maine, were so into learning about the Middle Ages that some might have actually gone on a shower hiatus just so they could live up to the title of their "expedition."

That semester, they also interviewed members of the [Society for Creative Anachronism](#) about the period -- and witnessed a raucous joust display performed by members of the international organization of reenactment aficionados -- and in language arts, they wrote memoirs about a typical week in the life of the medieval characters they had chosen to become. All this research fed into their final project at the end of the semester, a series of three-minute skits. They made their own costumes, booked the State Street Church (its architecture suggests the period), and then hosted the finale event -- a night of drama and comedy followed by a feast straight out of *Ivanhoe*.

What's behind this modern passion for ancient history? [Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound](#), a fourteen-year-old organization inspired by Kurt Hahn, the late founder of the survival-skills organization Outward Bound. King is one of the "star students" of ELS, which partners with schools to create a whole new culture within a school, one that changes the way a school looks -- and the way it sees itself -- from top to bottom.

The focus is on learning "expeditions": long-term student investigations that, though keyed to state and federal academic standards, are designed to nurture a strong affinity for dynamic learning and a curiosity about the world beyond the classroom. In ELS schools, the focus is on learning by doing, as opposed to the more passive traditional class experience.

At [Roots & Wings Community School](#), an ELS in Lama, New Mexico, for example, students recently rolled up their sleeves to plan every aspect of their own weeklong river journey exploring the canyons of the San Juan River, in southeast Utah. They then returned to the "real world" of the classroom to turn their notes on their adventures into multimedia reports.

At [Anderson School](#), a rural preK-12 ELS in Anderson, Alaska, students partnered with staff at Denali National Park -- just 70 miles to the north -- to design and construct framed, canvas-covered cabins with materials provided by the park administration. They then spent several days at the park (the site of Denali, otherwise known as Mt. McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America) studying its habitat, natural history, and geology. At the end of the school year, the

students disassembled the cabins on their own campus and reassembled them for use at one of the park's field stations.

One thing all ELS expeditions have in common? They're fun.

"One of our teachers recently said to me, 'Teaching's just not fun anymore,'" says Robert J. Van Maren, superintendent of the [Bonner Springs/Edwardsville School District](#), in Bonner Springs, near Kansas City, Kansas. "To me, it's essential that learning not only be fun but also be something that teachers and kids can get passionate about. I've never seen anyone be passionate about testing, but as a result of No Child Left Behind and other like initiatives, that's what we've been forced to offer."

To change the paradigm, Van Maren championed a recent effort to bring the project-based learning that's been so successful at King Middle School to his own school district. Recently, he received good news: Kansas City's [Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#) had awarded five-year, \$150,000 grants to four of his schools -- three elementary schools and one middle school -- to support their transformation into Expeditionary Learning Schools. That brings the total number of ELS schools in the Kansas City area to eleven, giving the region the opportunity to become the flagship of the movement.

Van Maren says this is where their schools are headed -- and that they'll get there without compromising national and state standards in the process.

"I'm an old science teacher, and I know that kids learn by doing, not by sitting there doing worksheets or practice tests," he says. "This grant allows us to use the best pedagogy available to teach using an investigative style, so kids can discover the linkages between what they're learning -- not just math for math's sake, or science for science's sake. We believe that the test scores will take care of themselves."

By test scores, or almost any account, ELS has a successful track record in education reform. After just six years in operation, Congress hailed it as a national educational model and was signing up schools from coast to coast. In 2003, the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) awarded it a five-year, \$12.6 million grant to create twenty small college-preparatory high schools.

That track record was one reason the Kauffman Foundation chose to partner with ELS. Another was diversity.

"In Kansas City, we have a huge range of school settings -- large, small, rural, urban, suburban, wealthy, not wealthy -- so we looked hard to find an innovative program that could accommodate our needs," says Margo Quiriconi, the organization's director of research and policy. "Their model has been successfully implemented in almost every kind of school imaginable."

This success is in part due to an ELS mandate regarding program buy-in: Before a school can apply, the school board must unanimously approve it, and 80 percent of school staff must agree on the proposal.

"Even though this is a school-based model, not a district-based model, we can't pick a school if we don't have support from the top down," says Corey Scholes, a former K-8 principal who is now the ELS representative working with the Bonner Springs schools. "Changing an entire school culture is really hard work. You just can't do it without the support of both administration and the teachers. The Bonner Springs school system showed an intense dedication to the model."

Joseph DiPinio, principal of grant recipient [Robert E. Clark Middle School](#), was a staunch supporter from the beginning.

"As part of the grant process, we visited Expeditionary Learning Schools around the country, and, in every instance, I walked away with the thought 'That's how I want my school to be,'" he says. "When you see something good for kids, you want to figure out a way to make that happen, but the costs for the professional development and the school design are so extensive. We wouldn't have been able to afford to do this comprehensively on our own."

"My passion has always been professional development for teachers, and now I get the pleasure of working on site with teachers twenty-five days a year," says Scholes. "I would have sawed off my left arm to have this kind of support when I was a principal."

Though excitement about the new venture is evident, Bonner Springs's superintendent acknowledges that the next five years will be challenging.

"Change is difficult, and it's always easier to just keep doing what you've always done," Van Maren says. "But we want different results. We want our kids to reach a new level of potential and be competitive with kids all over the world. Just as important, we want to bring the joy and passion back into the classroom. We want to create a learning experience that kids and teachers will never forget."

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