

# Structures Policy

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## **Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to be a guidepost for the instructional structures at Promontory School of Expeditionary Learning. Using this policy, trustees, administration, teachers, faculty, and parents can work together to create and strengthen a unique and effective learning environment for all students.

## **WHO WE ARE**

### **About Us**

Promontory School is committed to providing quality educational resources that support our mission, vision statement, and curricular emphasis. The resources needed are reevaluated and revised, as necessary, to do so.

Our chosen instructional emphasis is learning through expeditions and the study of Great Thinkers. Both support our mission and vision statements.

Students who come to Promontory School of Expeditionary Learning trade in passive learning practices such as rows of desks and fill-in-the blank worksheets for purposeful hands-on activity guided by meaningful, project-based instruction. Instruction is organized around learning expeditions that involve students in original research to create high-quality products for audiences beyond the classroom.

For all or most of the day, students and teachers are engaged in challenging learning expeditions that explore a topic or theme in depth. Their studies call for intellectual inquiry, physical exploration, and community service. Students are given the opportunity to demonstrate excellence and produce high-quality work through multiple drafts and critiques and learn to give and receive kind, helpful and specific feedback in peer review protocols. On a given day, their exploration may take them outside the school building to do environmental research, conduct interviews in local businesses, or carry out other fieldwork assignments.

Each day provides opportunities for quiet reflection; time for students to write in their journals, gather their thoughts, and reflect on what they have learned.

Students work individually, in small groups, and as members of their “crews” (see also Crew). Together they learn to draw on the strengths of the whole class.

Teachers are provided extensive professional development and resources to equip them with innovative, research-based methods to enhance experiential, hands-on learning. At Promontory, teachers work closely together and use peer observation as well as learning walks to learn from one another and enrich their teaching. They also work closely with other colleagues throughout neighboring states. Teacher development and

collaboration across disciplines is essential in order to offer our students the best education possible.

Promontory School implements a comprehensive teaching model using proven best practices in education. Ongoing professional development will be determined by faculty and administration based on school goals. Professional development will be conducted both on- and off-site.

A yearlong calendar and the daily schedule accommodate community meetings and events, crew time, flexible groupings of students, project work, off-campus research and fieldwork, and service learning. Leaders create a professional learning calendar that allows for regular time in which teachers collaborate across grade levels and subject areas, share in leadership responsibilities, and attend whole-school professional learning.

Families are encouraged to actively participate in their student's educational experience at Promontory School. A detailed calendar listing events such as overnight campouts, student-led conferences, etc. and a glossary of school terms will be made available online and in the office. Promontory School believes that parent involvement is vital to a successful school and optimal student achievement. Because of this it is expected that each family will contribute thirty volunteer hours a year.

## **Mission**

The mission of Promontory School of Expeditionary Learning is to provide a rich educational environment that views learning as an expedition and uses the study of Great Thinkers to cultivate the value of excellence and the love of knowledge.

Using investigation and discovery to make connections to ideas and our community, we empower children to embrace challenge, act with humanity, and become the Great Thinkers of the 21st century.

## **Vision**

Promontory provides a rich and active, yet fundamental, educational program to children in grades kindergarten through eight.

We believe that all children can and want to learn, and we prepare our students to become knowing inquirers and participants in their own learning.

In meeting our mission, we set high expectations for student achievement and provide the necessary support to enable each and every student to achieve these expectations.

Promontory School of Expeditionary Learning emphasizes active learning, literacy, character growth, and teamwork through:

- Learning Expeditions - in-depth investigations of important subjects that mirror real-life challenges, and
- Studying Great Thinkers - significant experts, both living and historical.

## Values

The values that govern our board, administration, staff, students, and school community are referred to at Promontory by the acronym RISE FAR. RISE FAR is an intricate part of our school day, culture, learning targets and daily interactions. Our school values are an integral part of each expedition. Each of the values is important and thus care should be taken to include them all in our planning and avoid an overemphasis on one value and neglect of another. We strive for balance in our implementation of our school values.

### **RISE FAR stands for the following:**

#### **Respect**

Respect is an awareness of another person's feelings, possessions, time, space, and rights, and an ability to adjust our own responses accordingly - in a way which protects and esteems both ourselves and others.

***Respect for ourselves guides our morals; respect for others guides our manners.***

*Laurence Sterne*

#### **Integrity**

Integrity means being true to what we know is right and good. Integrity is at the core of all our values. Without integrity, the other values can never be fully realized.

***Have the courage to say no. Have the courage to face the truth. Do the right thing because it is right. These are the magic keys to living your life with integrity.***

*W. Clement Stone*

## Service

Service means seeing beyond ourselves as we immerse ourselves in giving something of value to someone else and is vital to the development of good leaders and citizens.

***I know of no great men except those who have rendered great service to the human race.***

*Voltaire*

## Excellence

We believe students and teachers should be challenged, will naturally rise to the high standards expected of them, and will then set their own high expectations.

***We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.***

*Aristotle*

## Family

We believe that the greatest influences in shaping a child's future are the experiences and teachings that happen in the home. As a school, we strive to help the family succeed.

***As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live.***

*Pope John Paul II*

## Adventure

Learning through adventure creates an engaging environment where students are required to rise to the challenge, achieving more than they thought possible. Adventure encourages teamwork, courage, craftsmanship, imagination, creativity, perseverance, compassion, and respect for nature. We provide adventure through challenging, exciting, character-building experiences as a part of our everyday learning environment.

***We should come from adventures, and perils, and discoveries every day with new experience and character.***

*Henry David Thoreau*

## **Responsibility**

Responsibility means doing what needs to be done to take care of ourselves, our families, our friends, and the greater community. Being responsible means that others can rely on us, that we follow through on our promises, and accept the consequences of our actions.

***In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.***

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

## **FOCUS**

### **Great Thinkers**

Great Thinkers across all disciplines have inspired students through the centuries. Promontory School believes there is exceptional value in studying significant experts, or Great Thinkers, both living and historical. Promontory students study the words and works of Great Thinkers by delving into expeditions with original research and discovering the treasures left to us by Great Thinkers, such as Aristotle, Handel, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. The more students study Great Thinkers, the more they learn to identify greatness, and begin to understand how to identify greatness in themselves.

The Great Thinker policy developed and overseen by the Promontory Board of Trustees is a guide used by administration and faculty to intentionally develop learning expeditions using the study of Great Thinkers (See Great Thinkers Policy).

### **Learning Expeditions**

Learning expeditions are our signature instructional structure and drive our teaching. An expedition is a long-term, in-depth study of a topic that engages students in real-world learning and inspires students toward higher levels of academic achievement. The work students do within learning expeditions centers on critical thinking, essential skills and habits, and character development. Expeditions include compelling topics and guiding questions that create a “need to know” in each student. Depth, rather than breadth, is emphasized.

Each school year students will have the opportunity to be engaged in no less than two expeditions per year. The topic is chosen by teachers and studied as a community of grade-level classes.

State curriculum standards are met throughout expeditions through a variety of methods, including but not limited to: a compelling topic, kickoff experience, great thinkers, visiting experts, fieldwork, service learning, and celebrations of learning.

Learning expeditions are planned and designed by teachers with director oversight, are approved by the board of trustees, and should include the key elements listed above.

### **Flexible Scheduled Learning Blocks.**

Expeditions work best when time is structured with flexibility to allow attention to the needs of students who may be engrossed in research, projects, and authentic learning. Extended blocks of class time are provided to aid with the commitment to interdisciplinary learning, opportunities for student fieldwork and service beyond the classroom, challenging curriculum, and common planning time for grade-level teaching teams.

### **Arts**

The Arts are a crucial component at Promontory School and are used as a vehicle for studying expedition topics. (See also “The Arts”).

## **CULTURE AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

### **Crew and Morning Meeting**

#### **“We are crew, not passengers.”**

At Promontory School, we strive to create a culture of unity and inclusion, a place where students feel they belong and are safe to learn, participate in adventure, and succeed. Crew is a large part of creating this culture. Staff, students, and families learn together, pull together, and teach one another as crew. More than a traditional classroom, crew creates a tight-knit unit. That unit begins each day with a meeting in the morning. This is a time when teachers and their students come together as crew to team build, support each other’s learning and growth, shape and reshape culture, and build meaningful relationships with peers and the crew leader. Crews also use this time to reflect on and monitor academic progress, and to focus on character development. Closing crew is a bookend to the day, a time when we come together as a crew to process the day, reflect on learning and growth, and resolve conflicts.

The culture of crew impels all members of a school community to work together as a team, to pitch in, to serve and help others. Staff, families, and students help their colleagues and peers get up the mountain together - individual success is not enough. Crew helps develop relationships between students and staff so that each student feels supported academically, socially and emotionally. Through crew, students

can develop skills of confidence, compassion, listening, and collaboration as well as speaking well in front of a group. The skills learned in crew will benefit students throughout their lives and support them as they move forward into their roles as the Great Thinkers of tomorrow.

Students meet in individual classroom crews, in Super Crews (all four classrooms in a learning community) and as Mega Crew (whole school assemblies).

Student crews will be supported by parent and teacher crews, fostering a school wide sense of crew and community.

### **Authentic Products and Audiences**

Throughout each learning expedition, students work on multiple projects. The projects themselves are the means of learning important skills and content standards during the school day. They are not add-on enrichment activities offered after core learning has been completed, but rather the vehicle for learning. As students work on these projects, at times they will venture into the community to study and to serve in ways they never have before (See Service). Each learning expedition includes a high-quality, student-created product that has real-world application and will be meaningful to the larger community.

As the students create these products, they are learning important skills for the future. They are better prepared to create quality work, tackle real-world problems, and create real-world solutions. They will develop critical thinking skills and a greater sense of caring for their community and the world around them as they connect and serve in authentic ways. This will better prepare them to be great thinkers of the future, leaders in the community, and caretakers of the world around us.

### **Mixed Age Classrooms**

Whenever possible, Promontory School provides students opportunities to learn in mixed-age classrooms. The classrooms are combined as follows: 1st and 2nd grades, 3rd and 4th grades, 5th and 6th grades, and 7th and 8th grades. While grade-level groups may be appropriate for state standard-based math and science, remaining in multi-age classrooms for most of the instructional day offers several benefits. Mentor relationships for both younger and older students provide unique socialization opportunities. Multi-age classrooms provide expanded opportunities to provide individually appropriate instruction, meeting the differentiation needs of more students. Lastly, but very importantly, multi-age groupings allow a student the chance to spend

two years with one teacher, fostering deep and knowledgeable relationships between teachers and students, and teachers and families.

### **Heterogenous groupings**

Promontory School believes that whole-class homogenous leveling, or ability grouping, is harmful to students and learning. Mixed or heterogeneous classrooms have proven beneficial to students at all levels of academic performance. As both diversity and inclusion increase the richness of ideas, creative power, problem-solving ability, and respect for others, learning groups are heterogeneous. Differentiation is key to meeting the needs of every student in a mixed level classroom. This will include fluid grouping within the mixed level classroom. Sometimes children of similar levels will be instructed together in small groups. Other times, within the classroom, children of varying levels of mastery will be grouped together. Smaller class sizes will be the overall aim to maximize student learning.

### **Student Led Conferences**

Student Led Conferences are held twice a year and are an opportunity for students to demonstrate and communicate to families and caregivers what they are working on, what they have learned, and what they have accomplished. Students present mastery of skills and knowledge, as well as character development. Student Led Conferences include drafts showing student growth that has resulted in high quality work.

Teachers and/or the director communicate in advance to notify parents, families, and caregivers when student-led conferences will be held. They also help parents, families, and caregivers understand the role of each member of the educational team: parent, teacher, and student.

### **Portfolios**

Portfolios are student created and maintained to track individual assessment performance and ongoing academic progress. Students include in their portfolios, draft work, reflections, and personal best. Examples of assessment tools within a portfolio are:

- Display sections to highlight significant work, project work and tests.
- Revision sections and written reflection areas to show their process of learning over a period of time.
- Individual student achievements and progress charts.

- Rubrics for major projects and assignments.
- Gifts and talents section dedicated to keeping track of students' progression and helping them set and achieve challenging goals around their unique gifts.

The data collected for portfolios is in constant use as a tool for learning and drives student goal setting as well as future instruction. Teachers, students, and parents use the gathered information in curricular decisions based on their joint assessment of the student's progress and interest.

Teachers and crew help students prepare by assisting them in selecting work for their portfolios, encouraging reflection on and articulation of their growth and development, and helping them practice and present with confidence what they have accomplished and learned with confidence.

### **Intensives & Middle School Electives**

Promontory School of Expeditionary Learning dedicates time and space for intensives two times a year. During intensives, regular studies are set aside, and students and teachers have the opportunity to explore a chosen topic in great depth all day, every day, for 3-10 days, as appropriate for the intensive topic and age group. Some topics are better studied in an intense, all-day manner where students can utilize tools and resources, go out in the community, and focus on larger projects, etc., without being bound by the normal daily schedule. Intensive topics may vary widely--from adventure simply for adventure's sake, to core curriculum not covered during the expeditions.

Intensives serve many purposes, including providing students opportunities to learn or do something that they would not experience if it was not for the intensive, to provide service, or to cover standards that have not been met through expeditions. Plans for intensives include a guiding question, learning targets, a scope and sequence of learning experiences (which could include fieldwork or expert speaker(s)), and a product.

Intensives are planned and designed by teachers with director oversight, are presented to the board of trustees, and should include the key elements listed above.

### **Passages**

A Passage is a presentation of a student's learning, prepared and shared by the student. Students in grades 2, 4, 6, and 8 prepare throughout the year for a Passage and have the opportunity to present their core subjects of learning, exemplary work, accomplishments, and growth. Beginning with 2nd grade, each passage experience builds one on another until at the close of students' 8th grade year they present their

polished portfolios to a panel that may consist of parents, teachers, student alumni, a member of the community, as well as a student advocate.

In Passages, students articulate what they have learned, why it is important, and are responsible to present work samples from their portfolios as well as be able to:

- Identify learning targets
- Demonstrate level of mastery
- Identify specific revisions
- Reflect on and speak to their learning journey

This helps students to see the areas in which they've grown, obstacles they've overcome and celebrate their successes with others. Watching other students' passages and participating with comments and questions helps develop the culture of crew as they celebrate one another's successes and the obstacles they've overcome. The student passage also provides evidence that the student will be successful in the upcoming grade and contains concrete proof of the important skills and habits developed throughout the previous years. The passage showcases this learning and is an important tradition at Promontory School as they advance to the next grade.

Teachers work with students to ensure their portfolios and passage presentations are on target and that the presentation environment is supportive. These portfolios show the progression from studying a "Great Thinker" in the expeditions to becoming a "Great Thinker."

## **The Arts**

The arts are essential at Promontory School and will be used as a vehicle for learning. The arts are woven into the daily curriculum as well as an important part of our expeditions and final products. In learning expeditions, students have the opportunity to create, perform, and respond to a variety of art forms, and to connect the arts to expedition content. Our school is filled with student artwork displayed in a way that honors the work.

All students attend art classes. K- 4th grade students attend music class, and 5th through 8th grade students have the opportunity to choose an art elective in the form of a music class such as Orchestra or Choir.

## **Community**

The increase of a student's learning opportunities does not end when a student chooses to come to Promontory School. Once inside, students learn that they will form

partnerships with educators and, with guidance, will become responsible for their own learning. As students work as individuals and in groups, they find that their ideas matter and that their voices will be heard. Students venture into the community to study with local experts in ways that they never have before. They create tangible products with each expedition which will be meaningful to an authentic audience, and that audience is often members of the community

Service is seeing beyond ourselves and immersing ourselves in giving something of value to someone else. Service is vital to the development of good leaders and citizens. Promontory School is designed to engage students in their community by having students interact directly with community leaders and members to develop plans for service projects. By doing so, students take ownership and pride in their contributions to their community.

Service learning, a teaching and learning strategy, is used to help connect students to the world beyond the school walls and integrate meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. Teachers purposefully incorporate service learning as an integral part of at least one learning expedition each year.

The development of the school's outdoor learning center not only provides an exceptional space for learning for our students; it is also inviting and useful for the community as they use it outside of school hours. We strive to be good neighbors by keeping our property clean and safe, and by creating spaces that are welcoming to community members.

Community is also promoted at Promontory School through Celebrations of Learning. Celebrations of Learning are held each semester for the authentic sharing of student learning with the community.

### **Celebrations of Learning**

Celebrations of Learning take place each semester to communicate student learning with parents and members of the community, making learning at Promontory School public. Invited guests have the opportunity to view quality expedition end products created by students and to listen and watch as students articulate their findings, their questions, and their learning journey.

## INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES

### Professional Development

Promontory School of Expeditionary Learning facilitates on-going professional development to faculty for the successful implementation of proven best practices that fulfill our vision and mission. Curriculum development and planning, student engagement, character development, achievement, and high-quality work are all areas that are pursued in school professional development. We emphasize:

- a rigorous and engaging methodology
- an active, inquiry-based approach to teaching
- a school culture that fosters respect, enthusiasm, collaboration, and the idea that, with effort, everyone can achieve more than they thought possible.

Implementing learning through expeditions goes beyond mastering a fixed body of knowledge, methods, or materials. Expeditions are an innovative methodology requiring continual professional support and development for successful implementation. Additionally, the instructional planning and lesson designs change with each expedition, requiring teachers themselves to be learners, implement and master new practices and model learning for students. Dedicating a large portion of the budget to Professional Development is viable because spending on textbooks is limited. Learning Expeditions require readings from various original sources rather than relying on textbooks.

The school director ensures that each faculty member is professionally trained in the innovative methods and philosophies at Promontory School and gives them opportunities to train one another on methods learned. Teachers are given opportunities to attend leadership training, conferences, summits, institutes, and various other training seminars. They collaborate with other teachers at Promontory School as well as other charter schools locally and nationwide to create expeditions that ensure that curriculum is covered and taught in a sequential manner from grade to grade. Additionally, an Instructional Coach is employed in our school throughout the year to personally train and reinforce principles of best practice.

Administration and faculty annually study and discuss culture-building literature such as: Promontory School Charter, Promontory Structures Policy, EL Education Core Practices, An Ethic of Excellence, A Culture of Quality, Leaders of Their Own Learning, Transformational Literacy, and Management in the Active Classroom, and other publications related to best practices.

## **Common Planning Time**

Providing significant time each week for collaborative horizontal planning (within grade-band communities) is necessary to support teachers in delivering rigorous, engaging, and authentic educational experiences within the framework of an expedition.

Time should also be made for vertical planning, up through the school from kindergarten through 8th grade. Kindergarten and first grade teachers, or 4th grade, and 5th grade teachers meet to discuss students and curriculum. This helps teachers understand and plan curriculum so that as children progress through the grades, we are preparing them for success.

Collaborative horizontal planning and vertical planning are also important components to teacher success.

## **Classroom Budgets**

Classroom budgets at Promontory School are robust. These generous budgets reflect the school's commitment to providing students with rigorous, engaging, and authentic educational experiences, including learning expeditions and extensive fieldwork. Planning and implementing these types of opportunities well requires appropriate funding for teachers and replaces expensive textbook and curriculum purchases.

## **Standards Based Grading**

A grading system based on learning targets and state standards is used at Promontory School. Each subject area teacher is actively involved in verifying and evaluating student progress. Student achievement is reported with formal progress reports. A school-wide system is used, and parents and students are regularly informed about students' grades and about how to understand the grading system.

# **FACILITY USE AND DESIGN**

## **Facilities**

### **Building**

Although the main focus with the facility is cost effectiveness and long-term operating efficiency, the Promontory School facility is designed with teacher collaboration and experiential learning in mind. A community-focused floor

plan reflects the values of community-based learning by designing space that facilitates bringing the school community together for collaboration, including group projects and team building and allowing for the clustering of grade-specific classrooms for sharing and encouraging creativity. Additionally, this design allows for the flexible delivery of learning through expeditions while limiting operational problems. Promontory School's community-focused floor plan includes: 1) Grouping classrooms in communities, 2) Creating central common areas per community, and 3) Designing for students' original work to be prominently displayed.

## **Playground**

It was and is important to Promontory School to extend learning expeditions to all aspects of the school, including the playground. Promontory values the exploratory, creative space of the playground and views it as a playful extension of the facility. This has been accomplished by providing educational and interactive play environments that offer play for the future scientist, inventor, engineer, archeologist, musician, and artist. Promontory also views this time as an opportunity for the children to connect with nature and encourage exploration and group play in a new and natural environment.

For the purposes mentioned, Promontory chose the following structures for its playground.

- Natural World Structures (large faux rocks and logs)
- Discovery Structures (faux dinosaur skeletons for dig sites and climbing)
- Musical Expression Structures (xylophones, chimes, bells, and drums)
- Traditional Playground Structures (climbing wall and slide)

## **Outdoor Learning & Adventure Center**

The school owns a five-acre plot to the west of the building that is allocated as an Outdoor Learning & Adventure Center for the Promontory students and the community at large. Much of the initial design and planning of this outdoor learning space has been completed by 7th and 8th grade students through learning expeditions (see also Learning Expeditions). This space is unique because of the student involvement throughout the whole process of development. Students dreamed up and planned most, if not all, aspects of this space, and students, again through learning expeditions, are currently leading, and will continue to lead, the design and execution of enhancing the outdoor learning space further. For example,

- Students, during learning expeditions about insects, build insect houses for several species of insects.

- Students, during expeditions about bees, paint beehives to house the very insects they study.
- Students study seeds and use the greenhouses in the pollination garden to grow them into plants and food.
- Students participate and direct science talks in the outdoor learning spaces they design.
- Students develop and improve this outdoor learning space as a place to create and display final learning products.

Future changes to the building, playground, and outdoor learning center should be planned with consideration to the principles and vision outlined above.

## **Library**

Our library is the heart of our school. It is our belief that in order to love reading, children need access to books. The library is available to all students to check out books.

The library currently is, and will continue to be, equipped with books that support learning expeditions, the core curriculum, and the study of Great Thinkers. Each year, the librarians work with teachers to purchase books and reference materials to facilitate the learning expeditions. Students are exposed to literature written by and about the great thinkers of the world, not simply from textbooks, but from accepted classics, autobiographies, original sources, passionate authors, and other high-quality, meaningful books. Also included in the library are grade/ability-level books that encourage personal reading for pleasure, enrichment, and information. To support these goals, a portion of library resources are annually dedicated to “great thinkers” and expedition-related books. This portion is set aside to ensure that we will continually grow our collection of books to enhance our school mission.

Books and materials selected for the library support and are consistent with the general educational goals of Promontory School and the “great thinker” approach to learning. All materials should fit the vision, mission, and values at Promontory school. Students are able to use the library for reading, project work, small group discussions, and to collaborate whenever possible, as well as just to curl up in a nook or cranny and escape into the world of reading.

We strive to include activities in our library curriculum that will emphasize our school mission, meet the state core for library standards, and support literacy.

## **Technology**

The Technology plan at Promontory School is mission driven. Students are not just sent to the internet for research. They are original researchers, completing case studies not only through the use of technology, but also through personal interviews with real experts. Technology at the school will support but not supplant quality student work.

An important part of Promontory School is the creation of authentic products that come from semester-long interdisciplinary studies known as learning expeditions. In the process, students will use the same technologies as experts in the field, thus learning real-world skills. An important part of the technology plan, therefore, will be to include software that is authentic for students. Having these kinds of technologies readily accessible at the school will not only support Promontory School's vision, but also improve the delivery of instruction.