

Expeditions into Learning: KNOLLWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



Expeditionary Learning

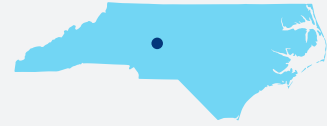
At Rowan-Salisbury Schools (RSS), we have a guiding belief: **children are more than their test scores**. We know not every student learns in the same way—and that when educators have the flexibility to try new, innovative teaching approaches, we can truly help students learn and succeed.

That's why the RSS team called state legislators with a bold request. **We asked for charter-like flexibility that would empower our schools and local Board of Education with more autonomy**. The policymakers were inspired by our data and experience-backed vision. They introduced legislation, which passed in less than a month. North Carolina's Renewal district was born!

Through our Renewal status, we enjoy curriculum, personnel, financial and scheduling flexibility. Every school in our district has created a plan to serve their students' specific needs, while building academic and interpersonal skills—and helping students pursue their unique life goals, too.

Now, through our case studies, we're sharing more specifics about what we've done, how we've done it and what school leaders across the country can try in their own districts.

ABOUT KNOLLWOOD ELEMENTARY



LOCATION
SALISBURY, NC

GRADES
PRE-K-5

SIZE
~500 STUDENTS

CHALLENGE:

Students weren't retaining concepts, and were struggling with subjects like reading and vocabulary as well.

SOLUTION:

The school launched an expeditionary learning model and incorporated project-based learning, too.

RENEWAL FLEXIBILITIES USED:

The team used hiring, budget and scheduling flexibility.



THE CHALLENGE

At Knollwood Elementary, educators knew they could support students in two major ways:

1

BUILDING CONCEPT UNDERSTANDING AND RETENTION.

At Knollwood, about 60 percent of students are English language learners. Educators found that with traditional teaching methods, kids weren't making connections between education standards such as vocabulary and their readings to how these materials apply to the real world—because they didn't have a strong foundation to do so. As a result, many students struggled with **reading, writing and concept retention**.

For example, if a student didn't understand basic vocabulary (such as fish or mountains) around environmental topics, then they weren't going to understand science courses focused on ecology. The team needed a way to make concepts real for students so they could learn and remember the materials.



2



CREATING EXCITEMENT ABOUT LEARNING.

The team also found that in many cases, students weren't excited about learning. They didn't understand WHY they were learning abstract concepts, and how they would relate to their lives outside of school.

Knollwood team members needed to find a way to expose their students to more of the "real" world—giving them opportunities to explore, engage and make learning come alive—and show them how it applies to their schoolwork, too.

How the Team Identified the Need

Knollwood Elementary started the Renewal process by analyzing the school's data, conducting in-depth research, conducting surveys and engaging the community.



Staff Engagement

The Knollwood team gathered together in a **teacher-led design team** to decide how they

could best serve their students. They asked questions such as “*what do our students need when it comes to academics? Beyond academics? How can we integrate core standards into our teachings? How can we go beyond the standards and help kids figure out what they want out of life—and how to get there? How can we include SEL?*” The team worked together during in-depth brainstorming sessions, in addition to planning as grade-level teams and individual educators.



Family Engagement

The Knollwood team engaged with families throughout the Renewal process,

so that families would understand the *why*, the *how* and the *what* behind the planning process. They started by **surveying parents to establish a strong foundation for this work**. They continued by building understanding about and buy-in to expeditionary learning. They prioritized families knowing how this learning model would benefit their children.

As part of this work, the team **invited parents and caregivers to join an interactive family night**.

The team set up tents during which parents and caregivers could engage in hands-on activities, and then explained how hands-on learning benefited students. They also explained the teaching and learning theories behind the approach, shared why the school was implementing new education practices and built buy-in.



Data Analysis + Research

The team **looked at the school's data** to figure out what areas

students were struggling in—and why. During this work, they looked at trends throughout the school and at test scores, identifying core challenge areas such as vocabulary retention and many kids feeling like school didn't have a purpose. They then created a plan to address these challenges.

The team **took a deep dive into the core standards that students need to learn**, in addition to how they could make these concepts come alive for students. Once they had their expeditionary learning idea (read more in the next section about this!), the team led a planning session that included a major spreadsheet of ideas. They then went through every idea together, gauging how it would help students learn, if it supported core standards and how it connected with the data and research findings.



Student Engagement

The team wanted to make sure that they created a *plan for students, by students*.

That meant thoughtfully engaging students throughout the whole planning phase. To do this, they **used student surveys and facilitated conversations** to ensure their design incorporated what kids themselves wanted—and what they identified would help them learn.



Continuous Improvement

The team continues **meeting to evaluate what's working** for their students, and where there are opportunities to tweak the work to better serve kids. Teachers also survey kids to get their feedback, ensuring they are heard and remain the most important part of the work.

The team continues engaging families now that they have launched expeditionary learning. They offer a parent meeting before every trip and invite parent chaperones, too. That way families have an ongoing, clear sense of every trip's purpose, what it'll mean for students and how the trips connect directly to their learning.

THE SOLUTION

Expeditionary Learning, All Focused on Core Concepts

Based on this in-depth Renewal planning process, the team **decided to launch an expeditionary learning program**. Expeditionary learning includes incorporating expeditions (trips!) into every grade level's curriculum, making learning hands-on—and exciting—for students.

The team created a plan for every grade that includes **trips that connect directly to their core standards of learning and SEL**, too.



“

Even something like walking in the woods, casting a fishing rod for the first time, learning about how to bait a hook and the circle of life...it makes the world real, a much bigger place for our kids. You can't teach this by reading or watching a video. The experiences we lead make learning come alive—and the kids are excited to learn and grow.”

ELIZABETH FARMER
LEAD TEACHER

The Work in Action

Imagine a child stepping off a bus in the heart of New York City, gazing around her—mouth slightly open in awe as she sees her very first skyscrapers. Or a group of kids cheering at a North Carolina State University basketball game, their hands waving wildly in the air. Another class telling stories around a crackling fire on their first camping trip.

These are all experiences Knollwood Elementary students have had. To ensure that every expedition (like these) helps students learn and understand concepts, the team created a set of guidelines. Every expedition:

- Must be related to the **core standards**
- Should include a **“wow factor”** for kids
- Needs to be **hands-on**, so students can actively engage in the learning

The team created an expedition formula as well, which we’ve outlined here.



Every Expedition Begins with a “Launch”

How does this expedition connect to science, to social studies, vocabulary, what we’re reading, social emotional learning? Why are we going on this particular trip? Every expedition starts by answering these questions—and then sharing them with both parents and students. Every **student and family understands how the expedition connects to education**, before the trip itself.

“

We are building classrooms without walls—that’s really what this is all about. We want our kids to wander and wonder, to ask challenging questions, to think about what they are learning and why. Expeditions give us the tool to open the world to them.”

KARINA REYES
FOURTH GRADE TEACHER



Students Prepare Before the Expedition

Every expedition includes both academic and social-emotional learning components that lead up to the expedition. For

example, before students went to the NC State basketball game, they studied math concepts that can be applied to sports—such as angles for shooting a basketball. Students studied relevant vocabulary, such as “rebound,” that can have different meanings in different contexts. They learned about sportsmanship and being kind to others.

In another example, before students went to the Outer Banks, they learned about beaches and historic buildings like lighthouses. However, they also talked about marketing and basic economics concepts—such as how to attract people to the Outer Banks in the off season and what happens in the off season for a tourist destination. Kids are truly learning life lessons, and in some cases, building early interest in career options, as part of these expeditions.



Students Continue Learning and Exploring During Expeditions

By the time students go on an expedition, they are **excited to apply their learning in a real-life setting**. During one trip to the Biltmore Estate, the kids were the ones sharing facts with the tour guide!

Educators continue teaching during the trip. For example, kindergarteners learn a lot about ecosystems, so they took a trip to the aquarium. During this trip, they continued learning about the concepts they read and talked about.



Students Continue Benefiting from Expeditions After Their Trips

Once an expedition is over, students engage in a “landing”—which is when **students and teachers reflect on their experience together**. They talk about what they learned and how it relates to both academic and social-emotional topics. Several teachers share that kids have “aha moments” as they talk through the expedition, and new concepts click. As part of project-based learning, students help plan expeditions based on their experiences, too.

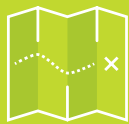
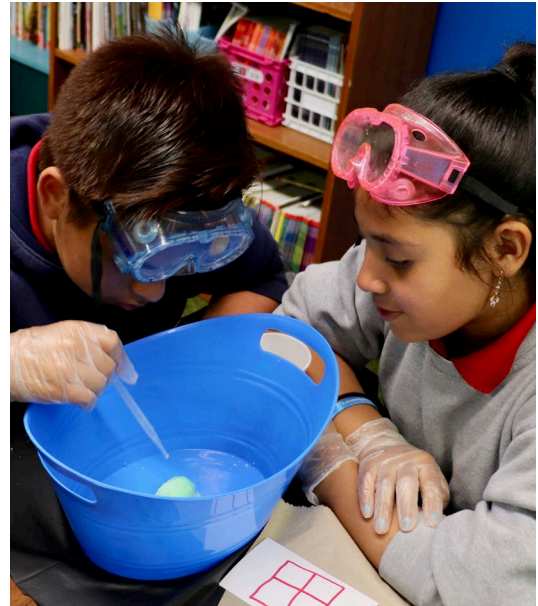


As part of the Renewal program, Knollwood ensures that students don't have to pay for these trips—so every student can engage and learn, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Lessons from the Knollwood Team

The Knollwood team wants all principals, superintendents and education leaders to know this work is worth it—and you see it in students' smiles, excitement and (sometimes new) love of learning. Their biggest advice includes:

- **Explain the why.** Ensure your team and community understand why you are doing the work and how it will benefit students.
- **Be willing to take risks.** When you are trying new teaching methods, it might not feel comfortable! This is natural—and means you are trying innovative practices that will help your students thrive.
- **Continue engaging your students.** For example, at Knollwood, teachers share a survey with students after every expedition. This ensures that the team can continue updating their practices to best serve kids.
- **Tie everything you do back to learning.** Every step you take should be about students learning—think about how you can make concepts fun and engaging.



Knollwood Elementary's Vision

At Knollwood Elementary, learning is bigger than simply addressing academic standards—learning helps children see how big the world truly is.

Teachers are empowered with the autonomy and flexibility to respond to and engage with each child's unique needs *so every day, everyone discovers and achieves the extraordinary*. As a result, kids build curiosity about the world around them. They connect academics with real-world concepts—and understand that by combining both, they can create their own paths forward. Students are excited to learn and to experience the world and the opportunities available to them.

Learn More about our Renewal work

- Download more case studies at resources.rssrenewal.org
- Reach out to principal Kimberly Martin at martinkj@rss.k12.nc.us to schedule a conversation or school visit.

