

Philosophy and Culture of PPOS

The following is a description of the founding board's core beliefs about education and how students learn—and about a school culture that can provide the driving force behind the school's educational program.

Trust and Mutual Respect

Two concepts that help form the core of the Pagosa Peaks Open School educational culture are trust and mutual respect. We trust that children, parents and teaching staff have an innate interest in learning about the world and each other, and in making the world a better place. We honor that innate interest and intention by granting everyone involved in the School a large measure of autonomy and input into the ongoing and evolving development of the school culture.

We have adopted a set of principles similar to those developed over the past 70 years by the community-based education system in Reggio Emilia, Italy:

- Children must have some control over the direction of their learning;
- Children learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, and observing;
- Children have a relationship with other children and with material items in the world that children are allowed to explore;
- Children must have numerous ways and opportunities to express themselves.

These principles put the natural development of children—and the close relationships they share with their community and environment—at the center of our philosophy and culture. PCSI believes that children have certain human rights and should be given opportunities to develop their potential. We also view the child as an active constructor of knowledge. Rather than being treated as the target of instruction, students must play an active role as an apprentice and active researcher. Much of the instruction at Pagosa Peak Open School will take place in the form of projects, where students—and their families—will have opportunities to explore, observe, hypothesize, question, and discuss. Through this constant give-and-take communication, students will have many opportunities to clarify their understanding of themselves and their world. Our culture will promote these opportunities.

We view children as social beings, and a focus is made on the child in relation to other children, the family, the teaching staff, and the community—rather than on each child in isolation. In a similar way, we consider the raising of children to be the collective responsibility of the entire Pagosa Springs community

To that end, our culture will encourage a close connection between the school and the community (parents and the larger community.) The culture will also promote contributions of time and service coming from the school to benefit the larger community.

Modes of Learning

Pagosa Peak's approach to elementary and middle school education reflects a theoretical kinship with John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Hahn, among others.

Much of what occurs in the school will challenge conventional conceptions of teacher competence and developmentally appropriate practice. For example, our advisors will acknowledge the role that occasional confusion plays in the development of natural learning; thus a major teaching strategy is purposely to allow mistakes to happen, or to sometimes begin a project with no clear sense of where it might end, and an allowance to an appropriate end to reveal itself during the process.

While some of the learning at our school will occur through conventional educational approaches, the curriculum developed at Pagosa Peak Open School will focus largely on three key modes of academic exploration and social growth: Project-based Learning, Place-based Education, and Experiential Learning.

Project-based Learning

Students gain a deeper appreciation of information when they actively construct their understanding by working with and using ideas and materials. In Project-based Learning (PBL), students engage in exploring and solving real, meaningful problems that are important to them—in a manner similar to what scientists, mathematicians, writers, artists, performers, and historians do.

A Project-based classroom allows students to investigate questions, propose hypotheses and explanations, discuss their ideas, challenge the ideas of others, and try out new ideas. Research has demonstrated that students in project-based learning classrooms often attain higher assessment scores than students in traditional classrooms. (Marx et al., 2004; Rivet & Krajcik, 2004; William & Linn, 2003).

Project-based Learning is an overall approach to the design of learning environments. These environments at Pagosa Peak Open School will have five key features:

1. They start with a driving question, a problem to be solved.
2. Students explore the driving question by participating in authentic, situated inquiry—processes of problem solving that are central to expert performance in the discipline. As students explore the driving question, they learn and apply important ideas in the discipline.
3. Students, teachers, and community members engage in collaborative activities to find solutions to the driving question. This mirrors the complex social situation of expert problem solving.
4. While engaged in the inquiry process, students are scaffolding with learning technologies that help them participate in activities normally beyond their ability.
5. Students create a set of tangible products that address the driving question. These are shared artifacts, publicly accessible external representations of the class are learning. These products (writings, illustrations, performances, etc.) are presented to parents, to students outside the group, and/or to the larger community.

Place-based Education

Place-based education (PBE) immerses students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities and experiences, using these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, visual arts, agriculture, science and other

subjects across the curriculum. It recaptures the ancient idea of “listening to the land” and living and learning in harmony with the earth and with each other.

Place-based education proponents have promoted the concept for more than 100 years. In “The School and Society,” John Dewey advocated an experiential approach to student learning in the local environment:

“Experience [outside the school] has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical sides. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it” (1915, p. 91).

Place-based education at PPOS will include outdoor education methodologies, as advocated by Dewey, to help our students connect with our particular corner of the world. The main purpose of “outdoor education” is to provide meaningful contextual experiences—in both natural and constructed environments. This education can occur both inside and outside the classroom. Place-based education has been referred to as “community-oriented schooling,” “ecological education,” and “bioregional education.” We envision a role for it in achieving local ecological and cultural sustainability.

Education should prepare people to live and work, while sustaining the cultural and ecological integrity of the community we inhabit. To do this, students must have knowledge of ecological patterns, systems of causation, and the long-term effects of human actions on those patterns (Orr, 1994).

One of the most compelling reasons to adopt place-based education is to provide students with the knowledge and experiences needed to actively participate in the democratic process.

Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning is closely related to Project-based Learning, but further helps define the PPOS as a place where authentic, meaningful experiences take place, and where experiences—planned or unplanned—are, in turn, given meaning within the culture.

Students at Pagosa Peak Open School will learn through doing, and by reflecting and discussing what those experiences have taught them. Students will develop knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences, both in and out of a conventional academic setting.

The concept of experiential learning explores the cyclical pattern of all learning from Experience through Reflection and Conceptualizing, to Action and on to further Experience. Well-planned, supervised and assessed experiential learning programs will stimulate academic inquiry by promoting interdisciplinary learning, civic engagement, career development, cultural awareness, leadership, and other professional and intellectual skills.

Experiential Learning plays on that famous dictum sometimes attributed to Chinese philosopher Confucius:

“Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.”

Experiential Learning at Pagosa Peak will contain the following elements:

- Reflection, critical analysis and synthesis
- Opportunities for students to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results
- Opportunities for students to engage intellectually, creatively, emotionally, socially, or physically
- A designed learning experience that includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes

After visiting over 17 schools in Colorado and New Mexico, the founders of PPOS found that a school culture built on mutual respect was a factor crucial to student success. The PCSI board has chosen the Open School model because it encompasses ten principals of EL, with a focus on deep individual character development. The emphasis on self-directed learning through experience and experimentation, reflection, and revision are proven themes in both experiential and expeditionary models of education. Providing a strong foundation that allows students to experiment, fail, and try again in an encouraging, emotionally safe environment is key to fostering lifelong learners.

Advisors

“Advisors” is the term we use for the teaching staff at Pagosa Peak Open School.

At PPOS, the advisor is considered a co-learner and collaborator with the child and not merely an instructor. Advisors are encouraged to facilitate the child’s learning by planning activities and lessons based on the child’s interests, asking questions to further understanding, and actively engaging in the activities alongside the child, rather than sitting back and observing the child learning.

As with the children and parents, we see advisors as active life-long learners who are naturally curious and creative, and interested in making the world a better place. Just as students at PPOS are encouraged to stretch their limits and push themselves beyond their ‘comfort zones,’ in the same way, the school will encourage advisors to take risks, be creative, forego the mundane, and embrace the unexpected.

The advisor is expected to be, and allowed to be, an autonomous, creative co-learner who continuously discovers new and better ways to reach and inspire each child, to organize classroom activities in innovate ways, and find and develop avenues to involve parents and the community. The school culture will include extensive staff development opportunities, with goals determined by the advisors themselves. Advisor autonomy will be evident in the absence of teacher manuals, curriculum guides, and limited standardized testing. The lack of externally imposed mandates is joined by the imperative that advisors become skilled observers of children in order to inform curriculum planning and implementation.

While working on projects with the child, the advisor can also expand the child’s learning by collecting data that can be reviewed at a later time. The advisor will maintain active, mutual participation in each activity to help ensure that the child clearly understands what is being “taught”.

Advisors and parents will provide children different avenues—reflecting the Reggio Emilia concept of “a hundred languages”—for thinking, revising, constructing, negotiating, developing and symbolically expressing their thoughts and feelings. The goal is for the adults and children to better understand one another.

As students proceed in an investigation, generating and testing their hypotheses, they are encouraged to depict their understanding through one of many symbolic languages, including drawing, sculpture, dramatic play, and writing. Adults and students work together toward the resolution of problems that arise. Advisors facilitate and observe conversations regarding the extent to which a child’s drawing or other form of communication lives up to the expressed intent. Revision of drawings and writings is expected. Advisors allow students to repeat activities and comment upon each other’s work in the collective aim of better understanding the topic at hand. Advisors foster student involvement in the processes of exploration and evaluation, acknowledging the importance of their evolving products as vehicles for exchange.

Advisors give careful attention to the documentation and presentation of each child’s thinking, growth, and productive creations of the children. Rather than making judgments about the child, the teacher inquires, listens closely, and creates documentation with the child’s participation to reflect both the advisor’s, and the child’s, judgments. An example of documentation might be a book or panel with the student’s words, drawings, and photographs. By making learning visible, the advisors will accomplish several things. The advisor is able to study the thinking and feelings of the students in order to gain insight into their understanding. Also, the documentation serves to help the advisor and other educators to evaluate their own work and refine the curriculum accordingly. Finally, it gives parents information regarding their child’s learning experience while creating an archive for the class and school.

Advisors will also meet individually with each student on a regular basis in order to build the relationships necessary to guide students through their individualized studies.

Advisors can provide meaningful feedback to assist each student in the creation of a challenging personal, social, and intellectual program.

Parents

Parents are a vital part of the school culture. We view parents as partners, collaborators, and advocates for their children. Advisors respect parents as each child’s first teacher, and will involve parents in various aspects of the curriculum. The school culture will encourage parents, grandparents, and community members to volunteer during school programs.

As with the children, we view parents as learners who are naturally curious about life and interested in making the world a better place.

This philosophy does not end when the child leaves the classroom. Parents will be expected to understand and be familiar with the Colorado State Standards that apply to their child’s education, and will be expected to support their child’s efforts to meet those required standards. The school will offer numerous opportunities to make everyone

familiar with the importance of the standards, and will encourage parents to become creative education partners.

Parents are expected to take part in discussions about school policy, child development concerns, curriculum planning, and evaluation. Because a majority of parents are employed, most meetings will be held in the evenings. This way, all who wish to participate can do so.

PPOS will organize two Project Nights each year, where students can share portions of their portfolios and Projects with their families and community. Other community nights will include Back to School, Goal conferences (two times a year), Family Math Night, and Literacy Nights.

An Ethic of Excellence

Pagosa Peak Open School will embrace a culture of excellent outcomes, as described by noted American teacher and Expeditionary Learning's Chief Program Officer, Ron Berger, in his book, "An Ethics of Excellence." Rather than using numerous simple assignments (work sheets, one-paragraph essays, color-by-number projects, etc.) to address a topic, the advisors and students at Pagosa Peak will dig deeply into a narrower range of topics, based on advisor and student interest, and its relevance to events currently taking place in the local community and the world.

In the style of Expeditionary Learning, the advancement of these projects—individual or group—toward final excellence will utilize peer-group critiques and a culture that supports multiple drafts and revisions of student work. The ethic will be further supported by a requirement that final work will be publicly presented by the students to groups outside the classroom in scheduled lectures, slide shows, art exhibits, and other types of presentations.

Advisory

Pagosa Peak will institute an "Advisory" system similar to the system developed by the Archuleta School District (ASD), with some additional modifications.

From the CDE website:

"Students who feel a positive connection with peers, teachers, and other adults in school are more likely to achieve academic success. Struggling students, who do not experience positive connections with others, often exhibit behavior that undermines their academic growth. At Pagosa Springs High School, students and adults participate in team building activities, intramural competitions, contributions of excellence, service learning, advisory class periods, and school spirit competitions."

The basic idea behind the Advisory Program is to insure that each student feels a personal connection to at least one member of the school staff. Although ASD uses such tools as "school spirit competitions" at the Pagosa Springs High School to promote a sense of "teamwork" within their Advisory Program, PPOS will explore a system that is based more upon "cooperation" and less upon "competitions." The PPOS Advisory system may include service learning, exploration of the outdoors, work in the Edible Schoolyard, shared cooking experiences, and other team-building activities. Much of the

intention, however, is very simply to make sure each student has an adult within the school in whom the student feels comfortable confiding.

Our Advisory Program will be designed collaboratively by the entire school community during the first few years of school development. Because Pagosa Peak places additional stress on parent participation, and because we view the school as a “community”, we will seek program input from students and parents, as well as from advisors and the governing board to guide the development of the Advisory Program.

Physical Environment

The organization of the physical environment is the child’s “third teacher”. Major aims in the planning of new or remodeled spaces in the school include the integration of each classroom with the rest of the school, and the school with the surrounding community. The importance of the environment lies in our belief that children can best create meaning and make sense of their world within an environment which supports varied, sustained, and changing relationships between people, the world of experience, ideas and the many ways of expressing ideas.

The school will include indoor plants and vines, natural light, cooking and eating spaces, and connections to the outdoors. Entries capture the attention of both children and adults through the use of adult and child-generated artwork, writings, projects, documentary photography, and news about the world outside the school building. These same features characterize classroom interiors, where displays of project work are interspersed with arrays of found objects and classroom materials.

In each classroom there are clearly designated spaces for large- and small- group activities. Throughout the school, there is an effort to create opportunities for children to interact. The classrooms are connected with telephones, passageways, and windows. Lunchrooms and outside spaces are designed to encourage community.

Outdoor spaces will include gardening activities and plenty of room to run, climb, and participate in spontaneous or advisor-directed group activities.

We are committed to building a learning environment that welcomes active physical movement.

Simply by getting students (and advisors) out of their seats, we can encourage new levels of self- discovery and self-expression, and by allowing students to experience the curriculum through their bodies, we help them make “deeper emotional, interpersonal, and kinesthetic connections to academic and non-academic subjects” as proposed by Susan Griss in her book, *Movement and Learning: The Power of Movement in Teaching and Learning*.

The structure of learning will be diverse, authentic, and active in nature by offering small groups, teams, partners, individual work, sitting, standing, and moving to different learning spaces (i.e. other rooms, outside).

Learning will take place beyond the four walls of the classroom. We will work with other grade levels, teachers, and our community. Students will be active and engaged owners of their hands-on learning. As substantial educational research suggests, students will

boost academic learning from games and other so-called “play” activities. Many play-oriented movements have the capacity to improve cognition. Play, recess, and physical education are essential for many biological reasons, including the processing of academic concepts.

The Temporal Environment

The management of time at Pagosa Peak Open School will be based more upon the natural unfolding of lessons and projects, rather than upon an adherence to rigidly defined schedules. Students will be allowed large blocks of time to explore subject matter. “Bells” or other artificial time constraints will be avoided wherever and whenever possible. Deadlines will be used to motivate completion of tasks, but advisors and students will be encouraged to adjust schedules in the space between beginning a project and the completion deadline.

Many people who arrive in Pagosa Springs from urban environments find themselves taken aback by the more casual attitude toward “clock-time” typical to rural lifestyles and communities. The term “Pagosa Time” is used by both locals and newcomers to describe this difference in attitude about the importance of time schedules. Some of this cultural difference relates to the way clocks are employed in urban offices and factories, as compared to the way an agricultural culture approaches the allocation of time. As part of a rural, traditionally agricultural community, PPOS will make an effort to respect and accommodate community attitudes regarding time and scheduling.

Global Understanding

To increase intercultural understanding and an appreciation for world cultures, Pagosa Peak will foster explorations of various beliefs, values, experiences and ways of knowing. The goal of understanding the world’s rich cultural heritage invites the learners to explore human commonality, diversity and interconnection.

Our diverse learning environment will aim to develop international-mindedness in a global context, to help learners become more globally aware and engaged.

Food

In traditional family life, the sharing of meals has historically been one of the central features for promoting family unity and communication, and creating lasting personal relationships.

Americans rarely eat together anymore. Some studies indicate that the average American eats one in every five meals in their car, and one in four Americans eats at least one fast food meal every single day. The majority of American families report eating a single meal together less than five days a week.

Children who do not eat dinner with their parents at least twice a week also were 40 percent more likely to be overweight compared to those who do, as outlined in a 2015 research presentation delivered at the European Congress on Obesity. Children who do eat dinner with their parents five or more days a week have less trouble with drugs and alcohol, eat healthier, show better academic performance, and report being closer with

their parents than children who eat dinner with their parents less often, according to a study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

The collective harvesting, preparation and sharing of food will be a central part of the culture at Pagosa Peak Open School. Food projects—gardening, preservation, preparation, cooking and serving—will be blended with science, arithmetic, social studies, and communication projects, to include measuring, estimation, horticulture, writing, world cultures, world languages, video, photography, art and, of course, health and nutrition.

Food projects will accommodate alternative diets (for example, vegetarian, gluten-free, and avoidance of highly processed foods.)

Parents will be encouraged to join the students in creating and enjoying shared school meals, and in working in the school garden.

PPOS will take advantage of state and federal grant programs to enhance the school food program. These grants may include the USDA Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program, the National School Lunch Program and the Summer Food Service Program. We also plan to collaborate with the Geothermal Greenhouse Partnership and other local food producers.

Collaboration

One of the most solid findings to emerge from learning sciences research is the important role of social interaction in learning. The best learning results from a particular kind of social interaction: when teachers, students, and community members work together in a situated activity to construct shared understanding. Learners develop understandings of principles and ideas through sharing, using, and debating ideas with others. It is this back-and-forth sharing, using, and debating of ideas helps to create a community of learners.

A chief result will be the development of the student's ability to negotiate in the peer group.

One of the most challenging aspects of our culture is the solicitation of multiple points of view regarding children's needs, interests, and abilities, and the concurrent faith in parents, teachers, and children to contribute in meaningful ways to the determination of school experiences. Advisors will trust themselves to respond appropriately to children's ideas and interests, while also trusting children to be interested in things worth knowing about, and trusting parents to be informed and productive members of a cooperative educational team. The result is an atmosphere of community and collaboration that is developmentally appropriate for adults and children alike.

Responsibility

We believe that children create their concept of the world by interacting with other people in the community (as well as with pets, livestock animals, plants) and with materials and technology. We believe this creation process is enhanced when the child is able to choose his/her own approach to researching and interacting with the world.

Autonomous manipulation of materials and ideas, in a trusting, respectful environment, leads to natural learning.

This approach has been developed and shown to be successful in schools all around the world, in terms of creating life-long learners who care about their communities and the environment, and who are also willing to be active participants in the political and social evolution of their city, region and nation.

Assessment

Many education professionals in America have embraced the idea that “learning” should be evaluated as a “product”—that we can properly measure learning by administering a paper-based or computer-based test of acquired knowledge.

Pagosa Peak Open School embraces a rather different idea about learning. We view learning as an active, ongoing process that is actually hindered by the (misguided) belief that questions have only one correct answer.

At Pagosa Peak, assessment will not be focused solely upon “what a student has learned” but will also include “how the student is learning”—“how the student uses his/her natural curiosity to guide research and investigation.” Additional assessments will focus on the child’s ability to use a range of materials (clay, wood, paper, paint, pencils, computer keyboards, video cameras, still cameras, found materials, foodstuff, soil) to conduct research and communicate stories and concepts.

Student-created portfolios and regular teacher assessments will be used in place of letter grades.

In some educational settings, the attainment of knowledge and skills is viewed as an individual process. Inside and outside the classroom, thinking and learning are considered to be individual, rather than social and communicative acts. At PPOS, assessment will include the student’s ability to communicate with, and work collaboratively with, other students and adults. We believe that participation in groups is central to how humans acquire and process knowledge, and that this is true for adults as well as children. When a classroom functions as a “learning group,” the children and adults feel part of something larger than themselves—something that has meaning beyond what each individual has learned.

This approach to learning will require the use of “group assessments” as well as “individual assessments.”

Affective Learning

The students at PPOS will have subject matter goals, as defined by the Colorado Academic Standards—such as understanding number concepts and learning how to analyze written materials. But we generally seek to embed these goals in a larger aesthetic, ethical or affective context. In order to help our children properly prepare for a fast-changing, technologically driven world, we will honor affective and moral forms of knowing as valid modes, on par with, and closely tied to, scientific analysis. Students at PPOS will be challenged by exposure to moral, social, environmental and

political issues, as appropriate to their developmental ages—and will be expected to research and construct their own theories about human issues like justice, equality, and power relationships.

Failure and Success

Pagosa Peak Open School embraces risk-taking, innovation and open-ended exploration of subjects and techniques—by all school community members—as valuable and necessary to personal and community growth. We acknowledge that children, advisors and parents will not engage in risk-taking or exploration unless ‘failure’ and ‘success’ are both acceptable outcomes. We believe a culture focused on ‘success’ as the preferred outcome will generate little in the way of innovation and creativity. Our assessments of student achievement will include measurements of the student’s willingness to take risks and attempt projects that challenge the student’s current knowledge and abilities. Advisors and parents will receive the same type of compassionate encouragement to push their personal limits—and make mistakes as a natural part of a healthy learning process.