

PART 2

WHAT MIGHT THE REINVENTED SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

—George Bernard Shaw

Put your critical thinking caps on; this is going to be a bumpy ride. I expect you will find this section challenging but also appealing. You will, hopefully, think the ideas explored here sound wonderful and the community described would be a place you’d want to raise your children. But you will also probably think it’s simply not possible. This section will push against your experiences and your ideas of what school is—ideas that have been formed and solidified for multiple generations.

It’s difficult to imagine an educational system that is nothing like the one we have used since the nineteenth century. Each element of a new system will seem impossible if you frame and filter them through paradigms of that 126-year-old model. This section of the book is designed to create an image of what an educational system could look like if it had been allowed to evolve and change like so many other aspects of our society.

At the same time, this section is not meant to dictate what a reinvented educational system should look like. The contention of this book, as

noted more substantially in parts 3 and 4, is that the educational system at the local level will look different in every community. That is both the biggest benefit and the greatest challenge of everything spelled out in these pages.

We have come to accept that uniformity is necessary for cost-effectiveness, equity, and continuity. We have become convinced that schools must be very similar to ensure we deliver the same basic instruction and offer the same opportunities to all students. Without uniformity, we believe, equity will break down as those with greater resources and more influence improve the opportunities in their schools and those with fewer resources and less influence languish. This is a legitimate concern that must be considered (and is addressed in parts 3 and 4 of the book), but it is also a huge obstacle to moving our schools toward what should be their true purpose—ensuring every student can approach his or her full potential.

This section of the book will allow you to imagine what is possible and develop a mind-model of what could be. It will allow you to contrast the possible with the current model. Then, when reading the last three sections of the book, you will be able to consider the “what’s possible” model as an alternative when encountering ideas that sound promising but impossible.

This section of the book will imagine a community that has implemented an educational system intended to ensure all children in the community are able to strive toward their potential. The example will be built around a midsize community that, in our current model, would have one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. Chapter 17 explains how this might translate into other sorts of communities, such as those that are different sizes or more diverse.

This section was very challenging to write. Despite my advocacy for the ideas in this book and the evolution of my own thoughts and ideas, I have similar experiences and biases as the rest of our society. Like most educators, I have spent my entire life immersed in the current model and structure. So, as I work to imagine and narrate a model that would not be beholden to anything that came before, I catch myself falling back to paradigms and biases of that old model. That’s why I know how difficult it will be for most others to believe we can change in the ways this book insists we must.

Don’t hold in your doubts and disbelief; express them to anyone who will listen. But always try to leave at least a glimmer of a possibility. Use

what you're reading here and your reactions to it to start dialogues in your community. (Part 5 of the book delves deeply into doing this.) I am convinced that we as a society can do this if we can get past our past—so to speak—and are willing to put faith in ourselves. Our world will be a far better place for our efforts.

Finally, as you read through this section of the book, do your best to set aside thoughts of how we might arrive at the system being described. That is covered in parts 3, 4, and 5. The biggest challenge of reinventing public education is getting past the emotional hold of the current model. That hold will likely manifest in the form of, “Sure, that sounds great, but we could never do it,” and will originate from the current paradigms. Every significant accomplishment in our history had to overcome old paradigms and biases. We can do that with education.

CHAPTER 16

THE SUMMITVILLE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Summitville is a fictional city used to illustrate what a new model of school and learning might look like. Following the description of the Summitville Learning Community are three case studies to illustrate examples of student learning activities.

The city and school district

Summitville is a suburban/rural community of approximately six thousand people. It is located about thirty miles from a nearby urban area. The school district draws from the city of Summitville as well as a large area around the city in which most adults work on farms or in farming-related jobs. Most adults living in the city itself work jobs unrelated to farming. Many work in Summitville or similar nearby cities, while a significant number commute to the metro area.

The racial makeup of Summitville is 92 percent white, 5 percent Latinx, 1.5 percent African American, and 1.5 percent from other or two or more races. The school district enrollment has a similar makeup. There is a small but not insignificant migrant population that includes school-age students who, consequently, enter and leave the district with some frequency.

The Summitville Learning Community

Several years ago, the Summitville School District decided to reinvent itself. The district as a whole chose to design an entirely new system of learning for all children within the district boundaries. When this was initially implemented, families could choose to enroll children in a traditional district school or in the new model. Over time, all families chose to enroll their children in the new model, so the traditional school was discontinued. The school district is now called the Summitville Learning Community (SLC).

The SLC is not just composed of educators, administrators, and staff like in a traditional school district. Parents and families are considered integral members of the SLC. It also includes most of the local churches and service organizations, along with the chamber of commerce, local businesses, and numerous individual community members. Rather than being peripheral partners, all are integral members who see the importance of helping every child achieve his or her potential and contribute in numerous ways toward that end.

This community approach is reflected in the vision established during the early design stages of the SLC, which became an important tool for maintaining the integrity of the process. The vision has changed in small ways from the beginning to remain relevant and continues to serve as a compass and an occasional litmus test for the community. Here is the vision statement:

The Summitville Learning Community meets the learning, growth, and development needs of all children to ensure every child approaches and continuously expands their potential so that each is prepared for the paths they pursue in the future. Individually and collectively, they contribute to making our world a better place to live.

Supporting and reinforcing this vision are several principles of the SLC. Here is a sample:

- The SLC will commit every available resource to meet the needs of every child in the community so they will have the full opportunity to approach and expand their personal potential.
- The SLC will never turn its back on a child who resides in the community.

In addition, at the heart of the SLC are several important beliefs:

- The outlook of our community is dependent on the quality of the education provided to its children; the better the education, the better the outlook for the community.
- Readiness to learn a given concept or skill occurs at different times for different children.
- Maintaining a love for learning and learning to learn are the two most important outcomes for every child.
- Everyone in the community has a role to play in helping everyone else learn.
- Learning and the need to learn never stop; every one of every age in the community will model the importance of learning by continuing to learn.
- Children cannot approach and grow their potential unless they have real, substantial power and control over their own learning.

Prenatal involvement

One of the most significant differences between the SLC and traditional school districts is that children do not start a formal education program at some date set by a law, policy, or calendar. Rather, each child transitions from a family-centered learning environment to a community-centered learning environment when it makes the most sense for that child. Most families that live in the school district boundaries choose to start the transition before a child is even born.

In many respects, this is similar to prenatal programs offered formally through hospitals and community organizations and informally through extended families and social networks. The SLC involvement is meant to ensure parents receive prenatal guidance and assistance that will contribute to a healthy child and help parents better prepare for the challenges of raising a newborn. The difference—compared to prenatal programs found elsewhere—is that this allows the SLC to build early connections and relationships with the family and the child. These will continue as the child gets older and begins transitioning toward the community-centered learning environment—the SLC.

Early childhood

As in all communities, there is a wide spectrum of needs and desires for early childhood care. While everyone knows that children are learning from the time they are born, the SLC embraces and acts on this. The SLC realizes the learning environment during early childhood substantially affects a child's readiness to learn at later ages. Consequently, the SLC wants to ensure that every child has a nurturing, positive learning environment available from birth. Toward that end, they strive to provide anything a family would need to create such an environment.

Many families are willing and able to provide such an environment themselves. For these families, the SLC continues to nurture a relationship and seeks to create connections and interactions that will help smooth later transitions. These families are welcome to access SLC resources and services at any time. If families have different needs for different children or if their care and learning circumstances change, the SLC will be ready to assist.

Other families need or choose to use an SLC community-centered learning environment. This is similar to childcare centers and preschools, though there are some important differences. At traditional childcare centers, hours and days are limited; the SLC, however, figures out how to provide the care each child needs when it is needed. This is possible

because the SLC encompasses such a significant portion of the city and surrounding area along with the corresponding breadth and depth of resources, both human and structural. Using this vast collaborative network, the SLC is able to meet every child's and family's needs.

Providing care to every child when needed ensures the SLC treats every family and child equitably. Families with exceptional circumstances have their needs fully met while not being made to feel different because they need something beyond the norm. This approach recognizes that all family situations are different and honors this diversity through complete flexibility. Connecting and collaborating with all families through early childhood maintains strong relationships with and among families and truly fosters a sense of community.

Another important difference from traditional day care centers and preschools is how children are grouped. While children may be in a care setting any time of any day, there are times when larger numbers of children are together at the same time. When this occurs, children are grouped based on multiple factors, with all decisions based on what will best help each child thrive. The child groupings are dynamic and may change at any time. The environment adapts to meet the child's needs rather than forcing the child to adapt to the environment.

Because a child's care situation is regularly adapted to meet the child's needs, children experience and are guided through numerous transitions. These are great learning opportunities, and children become self-assured and self-sufficient. When unexpected changes or situations occur for a child, he or she is well prepared to deal with them so that they don't become traumatic events. Transitions are no longer a deterrent to learning, as they often are for children in traditional settings.

Student support teams

As noted previously, one critical belief of the SLC is that readiness to learn a given concept or skill occurs at different times for different children. The SLC, therefore, begins the learning process with every child—

from the youngest to the oldest—based on where they are in terms of prior learning, current developmental level, and current readiness to learn. The intent is to help every child approach her or his current potential and then push that potential constantly higher. To help facilitate this, every child gets a support team.

The support team's purpose is to guide, mentor, and assist the child along her or his journey to adulthood. The makeup of these teams is not predesignated but is formed based on the needs and circumstances of the child. Typically, the support teams include the child's parents and one or more other SLC children, along with at least one person trained in child development. The support teams might change as a child's needs and circumstances change as well as when support team members become unavailable.

Having SLC children serve on support teams benefits everyone involved. The children being supported have role models and mentors who are closer in age and with whom they may relate better. Children will also see that adults are not the only people who can offer things of value. In addition, children gain confidence and insights by serving as a mentor and guide while also reinforcing the knowledge, skills, and attributes already developed. The adults benefit by seeing just how capable children can be when given the right opportunities and circumstances.

The SLC learner journey

In the traditional system, all children enter formal schooling in kindergarten on a certain date. For the SLC learner, that journey begins at birth. For the SLC learner, there is no "first day of school" because there is no kindergarten—nor are there any grade levels. Rather, when a student is ready, she or he begins to establish individual learning goals guided by the child's support team.

For purposes of state-required student data and assessment reporting, there are administrative means for sorting students in more traditional ways, but these labels are not placed on the students in day-to-day

learning. Instead of being beholden to these assessments and grade levels, children determine their own goals. In that way, they have true ownership and power and will take responsibility for their learning. One of the support team's roles is to help each child understand why certain skills and subjects (such as math or reading) should be included as elements of achieving their goals.

ARE SUCH YOUNG CHILDREN READY TO SET THEIR OWN GOALS?

While it may seem impossible to put such a high level of responsibility in the hands of a young child, the reality is that children have always done this; it just hasn't been formalized as part of their education process. When children pursue their own interests outside of a school setting—like hobbies and sports or even subjects like math, reading, and science—they will continually pursue more knowledge and skills and can be voracious learners. They may not set formal goals, but they don't have to; they are simply striving to learn and improve and continuing to stretch themselves.

It is only when others—teachers, parents, and school boards—dictate what students must learn, how they will learn it, and how they will demonstrate their learning that children become disconnected from the process. Once their learning is controlled by someone else, they may even lose any personal interest they once had in a subject. By putting the children in charge of all of their learning, we let them take ownership and pursue the learning with a passion.

Having goals is only the beginning of the learning process and one of the three critical learning elements over which students are given substantial control. The second is determining how achieving the goals will be demonstrated. With guidance from support teams, students must explain how they will show mastery of each objective. Finally, the student works with the support team to figure out how to achieve each goal. This ensures that the activities and experiences in which the student

participates are those that best meet the student's learning traits and current readiness to learn.

Once SLC students determine how they want to pursue the knowledge and skills that are part of their goals, the SLC brings all its resources to bear on making the plan a reality. That doesn't mean students are doing entirely individual activities. In fact, most learning activities are done in groups; however, the activities are designed to achieve the specific learning outcomes of each student in the group rather than deliver some specific instruction.

Although SLC students learn academic skills similar to what students in traditional schools are being taught, they do so in support of more complex learning driven by their interests and passions. The SLC students know specifically why they are learning something rather than being taught things just for the sake of learning them or "because they'll need them in the future." The SLC is adamant that students understand and agree with the reasons for pursuing a learning objective; students must have an intrinsic motivation to learn if the learning is going to be long-term and transferable. (See the case studies at the end of this chapter for examples of what this might look like.)

The nature of the activities through which students learn is incredibly diverse. There are some but not many formal, traditional classes with a teacher delivering instruction to students. These might occur where a group of students is pursuing high-level, complex learning in a particular subject and where the students are capable of learning effectively in that setting. Because the students in such a class are there by choice and to pursue their own learning goals, the classes are dynamic and very effective with deep student engagement.

There are many "seminars" led by learning facilitators who have the requisite knowledge and experience to help students achieve their learning outcomes. These tend to be short in duration and offered as needed with adults or students serving as facilitators. The students are expected to lead the seminar discussions and activities. The facilitators help to ensure the discussions and activities achieve each student's learning

outcomes and only actively participate in ways that contribute to the learning. This may, at times, include delivering instruction, but only if that will best meet the students' objectives.

Beyond the seminars and an occasional "traditional" class, numerous other activities are used in the SLC. Students use individual or team projects to develop, apply, and demonstrate skills. They do service projects or develop enterprises. They use technology to access online courses, including those designed for K–12 students, college students, specific professions, and hobbyists. They contact people with particular expertise or experiences that will help fulfill a learning objective. Students use work-based learning activities such as workplace visits, job shadowing, worker interviews, internships, and partnerships.

**HOW IS THIS GOAL-SETTING
DIFFERENT FROM THAT DONE IN
A TRADITIONAL SCHOOL?**

This entire process would suck all or much of the joy out of learning for children if it was done with a rigidity and uniformity similar to that of traditional school structures. As with just about everything at the SLC, goal-setting is done with immense flexibility. Some children have an inherent desire for structure and order; they may embrace clearly developed and laid-out goals and benchmarks. Other students may have difficulty forming concrete goals and determining related benchmarks, and trying to do so may hinder the child's innate desire to learn. Such a student's support team will then work to establish the measures necessary for quantifying student learning and growth and ensuring the student is approaching and expanding his or her potential while also honoring the student's personality, strengths, and readiness to learn.

Meaningful, student-driven transitions

Because there are no grade-level designations, nor are students assigned to a particular school, there are no transitions between grades or schools. However, SLC students encounter significant and definitive transitions with greater frequency than students in traditional school districts. These transitions occur based on individual student-centered reasons rather than a policy-established date on which all students will transition.

The SLC students plan, prepare for, and execute transitions to achieve their learning goals. This helps prepare them to be confident, self-directed adults. They always have their support team and mentors available to guide and assist, but the power to try something new and different always lies in the student's hands.

Here is an example of what this might look like. A twelve-year-old student has been learning to play flute and becomes interested in writing and producing his own musical scores. The student decides he wants to develop a new learning goal related to this interest. He meets with his support team and revises his learning plan, which now needs to include exploration of writing and producing music. This, in turn, requires the student to tie the new plan elements into his other goals and activities and plan and execute the new elements. The changes require the student to add new information sources and, most likely, new people who will have roles in his learning. He will need to adapt and coordinate his schedule to accommodate those who will be part of this new area of learning. All these steps are transition elements for which the student will be responsible.

Coalitions and community: the foundation for expanding student potential

One critical outcome sought for every SLC student is the development and practice of skills needed to be part of a community. Toward this end, students become part of coalitions whose purpose is to help every

member of the coalition achieve their goals and develop their related skills. This goes beyond lending an occasional hand; coalition members become advocates and champions for each other. They come to each other's aid when challenges arise regardless of when or where those challenges occur. They help each other figure out how to overcome even the biggest challenges that, in a traditional school, could result in a student dropping out or falling terribly behind. Of course, the coalitions also celebrate each other's successes.

The sense of community found in the coalitions also increases student learning and the overall performance of all SLC students. The relationships, trust, and support of the coalition provide a sense of safety, which is crucial to students being able to take risks; and it is the ability to take risks that allows students to reach toward and expand their potential. When community members have true faith that others in the community will be there for them no matter what, they will push themselves higher and further than even they are certain they can go.

The infrastructure

The facilities within the school district were designed and built to support the traditional school model. These buildings are used regularly for SLC activities, in ways very different from how they were intended. All the facilities are considered SLC resources, and they can be used to meet not only SLC student learning needs but also other needs within the community. Students work with their support teams and SLC staff to determine the most appropriate setting for a planned learning activity. If an SLC building has the necessary setting, then the facility is reserved. In many cases, spaces in the buildings have been renovated to increase their flexibility and usability.

The result of the SLC approach is that every facility has a very diverse clientele. That is, the buildings may at any time include infants, teenagers, and adults of all ages. These adults may include parents, instructors facilitating seminars or other learning activities, entrepreneurs

who are incubating a business with some SLC connection, and lifelong learners who are attending a seminar or other activity to learn along with the younger students.

Due to the dynamic nature of the system, the SLC makes effective use of existing school buildings. Unlike traditional systems which operate during restricted hours, days, and months, the SLC is able and willing to operate 24-7, 365 days a year if needed to meet student needs. Consequently, the facilities are in use much more frequently than in a traditional school district, making them much more cost-effective. This has allowed the SLC to avoid expensive construction projects despite having significantly increased enrollment that would have exceeded their available space in a traditional system.

Discipline and code of conduct

Although somewhat expected, the degree to which student behavior concerns decreased in the new system was a surprise. Once given power and control over their educational journey, students also took responsibility for their overall conduct and performance. The SLC no longer has any sort of code of conduct or set of rules students must follow. Essentially, the expectations that have been established for students relative to participating in the community and setting and achieving their learning goals have eliminated the need for a set of behavior rules.

Because families are an integral part of the SLC, they are aware of the expectations and how they affect student conduct. Everyone holds themselves and each other accountable. This has created a collaboration of expectations that is not possible in a traditional system. Many of the conduct challenges in traditional systems are driven through competing interests of the many stakeholders, creating a web of “us versus them” and “me versus them” situations. These don’t occur in the SLC because everyone is working to help everyone else achieve their best relative to their individual potential rather than relative to others, and this is true of adults and children alike.

That doesn't mean the SLC is completely free of conflict, but the guiding principles and the overall integrity of the system allow nearly all conflicts to come to a win-win resolution. This is also one of the primary reasons for not having a specific code of conduct or set of rules, which almost always bring with them an inherent lack of integrity because they fail to take into account unique circumstances. It becomes nearly impossible to apply the rules and codes in ways that everyone views as fair. When conflicts arise in the SLC, the parties involved work to ensure the outcomes of the conflict and the conduct moving forward support the overall SLC principles.

ADAPTING TO THE NEW SYSTEM

As could be expected, children born into the new system and who have not known the traditional educational model feel comfortable and can function at a high level within this system. Children who have spent several years in the old model have a much bigger challenge adapting. However, their challenge is not as great as that of the adults, who constantly fall back on old paradigms and expectations and then set the bar much too low for students.

Most students, once they realize the SLC is serious about giving them power and responsibility, adapt rather easily. They become critical leaders of the entire change process because they are still learning and growing and don't have the institutionalized paradigms of the adults. Some students, often those who were the biggest behavior challenges in the old system, do at times see how far they are allowed to push their power. In almost all cases, they find no limit because, ultimately, the responsibility for the results falls back on them rather than on someone else, as had been the case in the old system.

The biggest challenges faced by the SLC come from parents and other family members. Children learning to push themselves and take corresponding responsibility often face old, low expectations at home as parents struggle to adapt and let go of compliance-based rewards and punishments they have relied on for years. Part of the transition is preparing students to help their parents work through these situations. The SLC also provides forums for parents to meet and talk about how they are working through these things in their families.

Working through challenges as families is nothing new. But in this case, unlike most traumas faced by families, it is a challenge of choice, with the possibility of significant positive outcomes. The families discover that working through this transition is an incredible growth opportunity that leads to much stronger relationships within the family as well as with others in the community.

The biggest challenges arise from students who enter the SLC after having spent time in a traditional school or another environment where compliance was driven through rewards and punishments. Such students don't immediately believe they will be granted significant amounts of power and control; they don't have a sense of trust in the

system or other people. The SLC takes steps to transition students in such circumstances. These end up being valuable learning opportunities for current SLC students. It helps them better understand how to help others build trust while experiencing the challenges that a lack of trust can create.

For longer-term members of the SLC, relationships developed across the community provide significant resources for assistance with challenges that arise. Rarely are challenges solely school-related. Rather, there are almost always out-of-school events or circumstances that affect behaviors and performance in school. Because connections between families and the SLC begin early and are fostered continuously, those in the SLC can more easily and effectively reach out to families and work with them to develop solutions.

The bottom line is that the community and all its members are working toward mutually supporting outcomes. Consequently, everyone wants to support each other and seek outcomes to challenges that are in the best interest of the community as well as those directly involved. Conflicts and challenges are opportunities to learn and grow.

Athletics, clubs, and extracurriculars

In traditional schools, clubs, athletics, and other extracurriculars are offered to fulfill student interests that aren't met through academic instruction and to create an incentive for adequate academic performance and appropriate conduct. They are also meant to help students develop and practice teamwork and leadership.

In the SLC, activities are offered specifically to fulfill students' learning, growth, and development needs. They never exist as incentives. Activities must have inherent value if they are to be offered. In some cases, this might include activities that are also available in traditional schools, in particular where this is the means by which the activities are networked to more substantial opportunities. For example, the SLC may offer various career and technical student organizations (such as FFA, DECA, and

SkillsUSA) so that students may participate in their corresponding state and national leadership development and competitive events.

The same is true for sports. The SLC offers some traditional team sports that are part of an area conference and the state athletic association. Participation in sports is integrated into student learning plans so that it enhances and never detracts from a student's learning goals. The SLC had to work through challenges ensuring students met state athletic association requirements (in part because the SLC does not label students with grade levels and doesn't provide academic grades or traditional academic credits). The SLC also assists students in finding ways to participate in athletics that it does not normally offer or where not enough students want to participate to form a team.

Transportation

While it seems providing transportation for students on a variety of schedules would be a challenge, from the beginning the SLC saw this as a great opportunity. In most districts, the challenge is having to transport all students attending a certain school at the same time and having to deal with significant congestion at the school twice each day. This can result in students spending considerable time on buses and the need for supervision and a place for students to hang out as the buses make multiple trips. With a traditional schedule, students riding the buses have to arrive or get picked up over a period of time (forty minutes or more for some schools), and parents of students not riding buses must be flexible enough for the students to arrive and get picked up during designated windows of time.

At the SLC, transportation is just another factor being considered as students develop their learning plans. As students determine the learning activities they will use to achieve their learning goals, they take into account where these activities take place or could take place as well as when they will or could occur. The locations and times can be fixed and regular or varied and flexible.

Then the students determine their options for getting to and from these locations at the necessary times. The SLC does provide some organic transportation assets that students can schedule, such as vans and buses. Rather than being used for regular daily transport, these are scheduled as needed. Students can also use alternatives such as parents, car pools, biking, and walking.

The SLC paradigm that learning can occur any time and that planned learning activities may then occur 24-7, any day of the year, has opened up incredible opportunities and contributed a great deal toward ensuring opportunities are equitable. By including transportation in this paradigm, the SLC ensures all children in the community, regardless of their family situations, have equitable opportunities to participate in any activity required to meet a child's learning needs.

Technology and devices

The SLC recognizes that using technology simply for the sake of using technology holds no direct learning value. Technology use is dictated by student's learning goals and the activities through which they will pursue those goals rather than being directed by the school. Essentially, students justify their use of a technology as a means of achieving their goals. Students with similar goals may choose very different means of achieving them, with some students making extensive use of electronic technology while others make minimal use of it.

At the same time, the SLC does not restrict the use of technology and devices. It is up to students to police themselves on appropriate and responsible use. They may enlist others' help in doing this if they feel unable to resist the lure of easy access to a device or certain apps (such as social media, videos, or games). One goal of the SLC is to prepare students to thrive in a world that is dynamic, uncertain, and filled with readily available distractions. The best way to prepare students to thrive in such a world is for them to practice doing so throughout their SLC activities.

Because students are committed to and invested in their own growth and development, they rarely seek distractions. SLC students receive intrinsic “rewards” for the learning, growth, and development they achieve. These are similar to rewards received through social media, such as the dopamine rush from getting a “like” for something. Student disengagement in traditional classrooms and the subsequent need for distraction are the primary reason traditional schools ban devices. With SLC students deeply engaged nearly all the time, there is no reason for devices to be banned.

Security and safety

The SLC is as concerned about student safety as any other school district, but the structure of the SLC means safety and security look very different. At traditional schools, with large groups of students located in rooms with limited access on a predictable schedule, security tends to consist of locked doors and a secured entrance. The dynamic nature of the SLC means people are coming and going at different times and school-related activities are taking place in dozens of locations. Consequently, it is difficult to similarly restrict access to outsiders.

At first, the SLC staff looked into technology to ensure student security. Ongoing conversations with students and parents, however, led to the decision that the SLC community would be collectively responsible for safety and security. The dialogues centered on the fact the SLC is preparing students to thrive in a world where personal liberty is valued above nearly all else and where overt security measures—like limiting access, security guards, metal detectors, and transparent bags—compromise liberty.

It is imperative that everyone in the SLC feels safe, so safety and security are points of discussion with children, families, and staff. Rather than implement overt, blanket security measures, everyone expresses their personal needs for being able to feel safe and secure. In practice, the sense of community present in the SLC tends to create a nearly universal

sense of security. Everyone knows they are looked after and supported by everyone else—and will protect each other should the need arise.

While this approach may not provide the direct protection afforded by a locked building, those physical barriers have not always proven effective when someone has chosen to act violently. The SLC has come to a consensus on accepting the risk in exchange for the rewards of the environment it allows to flourish.

“Graduation” and beyond

The SLC believes in lifelong learning and is committed to supporting everyone who was ever a part of the SLC on this journey. At the same time, the SLC is preparing children to be leaders and contributors to society beyond the SLC. Consequently, the learner’s journey within the SLC continues until the child determines she or he is ready to move on and the student’s support team decides that their goals have been met. If there is consensus among the student and their support team, the student is granted a diploma and a transcript of demonstrated knowledge and skills and all notable accomplishments and experiences. The diploma is provided primarily for those institutions and organizations that require one. The transcript, however, is a show of mastery rather than a list of courses attended and credits earned.

The SLC wants recognitions and ceremonies to have integrity and real meaning for the students, so instead of one graduation ceremony for everyone on the same date, the SLC acknowledges and celebrates when each student transitions to whatever will come after the SLC. The scope of the celebration, along with the attendees and related activities, will be up to the student. Other meaningful student accomplishments are acknowledged and celebrated when they occur throughout a student’s learner journey.

Because the SLC sees its purpose as preparing every student for success in the future, the student stays connected to the community as they move to their next destination. SLC members are expected to continue

serving on support teams in whatever ways are reasonable and beneficial to both the continuing and the transitioning students. In addition, SLC alumni are tapped for continuous feedback on how well they were prepared and what the SLC could do better to ensure success of future students. It is common for SLC alumni to provide support and assistance to the SLC and its students for many years after they move on.

Getting into college

One common concern about the SLC model is that students will jeopardize access to their college of choice. This is one reason many parents kept their children in the old model during the transition years. But thanks in part to charter schools with nontraditional transcripts, nearly every college and university today is open to students without a traditional transcript. In fact, many give priority to students who come from innovative schools. To date, no student has been rejected from the college of his or her choice based on the education, diploma, or transcript offered by the SLC.

Students at the SLC apply to far fewer colleges because they have a clear picture of what they're looking for in a college; they know college is a means toward an end, not an end in itself. So they only apply to those colleges that will prepare them for the future they envision and, in many cases, only apply to one college that they are confident they will get into. Because the SLC has prepared students to be strong self-advocates, they figure out how to get accepted where they want to go.

Graduates from traditional schools often meet the readiness requirements on paper but don't have the actual knowledge, skills, and attributes to be successful at the college level. SLC students have everything they need to succeed and the authentic confidence that comes from having already used and demonstrated it.

Further, SLC has prepared students who truly understand the costs of attending college—both in terms of finances and opportunities. SLC students consider the financial costs of their choices, how these can be met and their long-term effects, and what benefits they will receive in

exchange for those costs. The students also consider the opportunity costs of attending college immediately compared to delaying college or pursuing other options. They make decisions and develop plans that keep them from getting trapped by student debt or other circumstances that will severely limit their future options. SLC students enter their future with eyes wide open and a strong support network in place.

Standards

The SLC does not deliver a standard curriculum to its students, nor do the students take many standardized classes to which a standardized assessment might be connected. However, the SLC does use various standards, and the students participate in state-required standardized assessments; they are just viewed and used very differently than in most school districts.

The SLC believes that many existing standards are well done and have real value but are not useful as age-based benchmarks. As students create goals for the knowledge they want to acquire and the skills they want to develop—as well as attributes they want to foster and strengthen—they need to establish personal standards as a part of the goals. SLC students establish culminating and foundational standards and benchmarks that lead to those standards. In many cases, standards and benchmarks already exist that students can use to establish their goals and develop their plans. These existing standards and benchmarks may come from state and national education agencies, industry organizations, or previous SLC students. Through their support teams and mentors, SLC students come to recognize the importance of academic standards and the need to include them in their goals and plans. Consequently, they take ownership of achieving them rather than doing so for some extrinsic reward or punishment.

Standardized assessments

The SLC believes state-required assessments have little inherent value. They provide only a snapshot of students' abilities in a limited scope of

knowledge typically not relevant to the students. There are numerous factors that can affect a student's performance, further reducing the accuracy of these assessments. However, the SLC willingly participates in the state-required assessments because they validate the approach to education being used in the SLC. The state assessments demonstrate that SLC students can perform well and often exceptionally with no specific test preparation.

SLC students' individual standards and learning activities are not aligned in any direct way with state assessments, and students can choose to opt out of these assessments. In addition, SLC students do not go through any sort of test prep. There are no "test weeks" or "test days" on which measures are taken to improve the environment and make sure students are truly ready. There are no SLC-developed incentives for students to do their best.

The students know the state assessments have no impact on them. The students are asked to put forth the amount of effort they think is warranted. Because SLC students are committed to the school and want it to look good, most try to do their best. They also want to show that SLC students are better prepared than students in other districts. When SLC students do well on standardized assessments, despite no preparation or prioritization, it ensures no one can challenge the SLC approach to student learning.

World-changing students

Simply put, the SLC prepares its students by putting them in an environment and situations that are truly reflective of the adult world outside of the SLC and then fostering in them the ability to thrive in that world. The SLC is not content preparing students who will "fit in" and become another cog in someone else's mechanism. The SLC strives to prepare students who will challenge the status quo and lead change in every aspect of the world as well as being able to thrive in that dynamic world.

Where did the courage to do this come from?

Most people who learn about the SLC are amazed at what's been built and wonder how such a big risk was taken. How was a system so completely different from a traditional school system established?

The people in Summitville came to realize there was a crisis in our schools. The children's most important years for learning were being squandered. Residents trusted that, in diving into this effort, the community would come together to make sure the children—and consequently the community—would thrive.

In reality, there was no risk. They knew most people in the community would step up to ensure success. No one wanted to see the children receive less than the best possible opportunities to grow into successful adults. Once the people of Summitville chose to trust in that reality, they could focus on creating a learning community that would stand as a beacon of what's possible for the rest of the country.

Student case studies

These case studies provide examples of activities through which students will learn, grow, and develop along with samples of the standards they would achieve through the activities. The website knowresponsibility.com provides more comprehensive case studies to more fully illustrate what it might look like to attend SLC. The first case study below (Thomas) provides a sample of specific standards for one of his activities. To save space and avoid redundancy, the remainder of activities provide only an overview of the sorts of standards an activity would support.

Case Study 1

Thomas, 16 years old

Thomas has a wide range of diverse interests and so has a wide range of both standards and means of achieving and demonstrating those standards. These are some activities Thomas is undertaking along with a sample of standards he will achieve and demonstrate:

- Thomas will conduct research on the nature and scope of injuries related to soccer, hockey, and track, three sports in which he participates. He will then present his findings to his teammates, their parents, and the coaches. He will also execute a means of sharing the important elements of his research with youth sports players and their parents. This is a small sample of core academic standards to be demonstrated by this project:
 - Synthesize the key elements of multiple texts to support a common argument (ELA)
 - Prepare written arguments supporting findings and claims (ELA)
 - Prepare written report using proper conventions that is readily understandable by the target audience (ELA)
 - Present and support synthesized findings, claims, and arguments of research project (ELA)
 - Make inferences and justify conclusions from sample surveys, experiments, and observational studies (math*)
 - Use probability to evaluate outcomes of decisions (math*)
 - Differentiate between causation and correlation (science)
 - Predict effects of changes in variables on outcomes (science)
 - Evaluate the possible interpretations and impacts of claims and arguments on various audiences (social studies)
 - Using scientific practices, conduct research related to a problem or issue affecting individuals and/or society (social studies**)

- In addition to core academic standards, Thomas will demonstrate standards in computer science, health science, information and technology literacy, and physical education.
- Thomas will develop and demonstrate numerous physical education and nutrition standards through participation in soccer, hockey, and track through documentation of training, diet, and performance.
- Thomas will develop and demonstrate numerous world language and social studies standards through participation in a local organization made up of students and community members that immerses members in French culture and language several times each week.
- Thomas loves math and science and so is taking self-paced, online classes and more traditional college classes. Due to his personal interest in these subjects, he learns effectively and is meeting numerous math and science standards in these courses.
- Thomas is involved with math- and science-related competitive teams made up of SLC students and is meeting numerous math- and science-related standards through these teams.
- Thomas plays flute and saxophone with two different local groups that include current and past SLC students and a few community members. Thomas gets both individual and small group lessons to supplement the bands.

*Taken from Wisconsin Common Core Essential Elements for Mathematics (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2014)

**Taken from Wisconsin Standards for Social Studies (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2018)

Case Study 2

Anna, 17 years old

Anna describes herself as a “gearhead.” She has always loved anything mechanical and has developed activities that leverage that passion. Here are two activities Anna is undertaking and examples of standards they will achieve and demonstrate:

- Anna is “restoring” a classic muscle car while converting the car into a hybrid vehicle. During the project, Anna is submitting articles documenting and reflecting on the project to a car magazine while also serving as the subject of a documentary film being produced by a team of fellow SLC students as one of their activities. In addition, Anna and the documentary team are producing regular “how-to” videos to post online for others interested in pursuing a similar project. This activity includes standards in ELA, math, science, information and technology literacy, and technology and engineering.
- As an adjunct project, Anna is analyzing the financial and environmental cost-benefit ratio of the car conversion. This will be used to determine the feasibility of an enterprise for similar conversions on a custom basis. This activity includes standards in ELA, math, science, business and information technology, environmental education, marketing, management, entrepreneurship, and personal financial literacy.

Case Study 3

Brecken, 7 years old

Brecken loves comic books, playacting, and cooking. These are some activities Brecken is undertaking and examples of standards they will achieve and demonstrate:

- Brecken found other students who also like comic books and playacting. Together these students are writing and producing plays, videos, and animations based on their favorite comic books. The process of translating the static comic books into dynamic performances, whether live action or animated, is exceptionally complex and providing opportunities to achieve and demonstrate diverse standards in ELA, math, art and design, computer science, dance, music, information and technology literacy, technology and engineering, and theater.
- Brecken and many of the students involved in the previous activity are also involved in a related marketing enterprise. They are looking at the opportunities for earning an income from collecting and selling comic books and memorabilia as well as the possibilities of marketing their video and animation productions. This activity allows Brecken to achieve and demonstrate standards in ELA, math, art and design, business and information technology, marketing, management, entrepreneurship, and personal financial literacy.
- Brecken is creating a cookbook and producing a web-based cooking show which allows him to achieve and demonstrate diverse standards in ELA, science, agriculture, food science and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, art and design, nutrition, music, and theater.