

Embark Education: Rethinking Middle School Through Embedded, Integrated, and Learner-Centered Education

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Overview:

Location: Denver, CO

Profile: Business-embedded micro-school

Grades: 6th – 8th

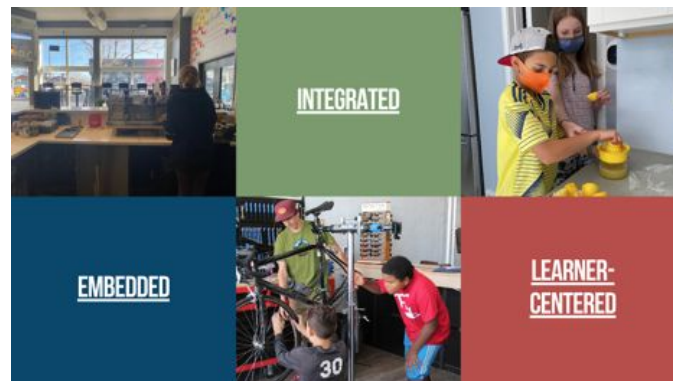
Mission: Supporting students to courageously inquire, engage, and discover a sense of self



Embark Education is a micro middle school based in North Denver that is embedded in two small businesses called “Shops”: Framework Cycles and Pinwheel Coffee. Guided by its mission to support students to courageously inquire, engage, and discover a sense of self, Embark is rethinking what is possible in education for middle-grade students.



Since Embark Education began in 2019 learning has been centered on three design pillars:



1. **Learner-centered** – Embark starts with students’ questions, strengths, and needs.
2. **Embedded** – Learning is grounded in authentic experiences in the shops and the greater community. Students work in the shops, create solutions for the shops, and partner with the community to make a difference.
3. **Integrated** – Learning isn’t siloed into disciplines, instead it is interdisciplinary and integrated with real-world learning.

One example of their design pillars in practice is how Embark **schedules** learning. Students receive a blank schedule template on Monday morning with only their required, whole-group experiences filled in. From there each student adds additional activities for the week including shop shifts, 1:1s with educators, personal projects, collaborative project work blocks, and break time, too. Students are encouraged to schedule breaks where they might choose to take a walk, play a game with friends who are available, or any other activity. There is also additional blank space left later in the week to allow for adjustments, catch-up, and new projects that arise.

NEELA

Schedule Week of: 4/19/2021

	4/19 MONDAY	4/20 TUESDAY	4/21 WEDNESDAY	4/22 THURSDAY	4/23 FRIDAY
8:30 AM	Class Meeting	Warm Entry	Warm Entry	Warm Entry	
9:00 AM	PW	P&P MATH	MATH A		
9:30 AM		PRINCIPLE DOB			
10:00 AM	P&P HUMANITIES	MATH TASK W LUGG		Cross Team Challenge	
10:30 AM		P&P FRAME	CONFERENCE 11:30-11:45		
11:00 AM	IND. READINGS				
11:30 AM					
12:00 PM	LUNCH				
12:45 PM	SHOP SHIFT	STUDENT DUE			
1:05 PM	PW SO. REVIEW				
1:25 PM	IXL			Movement	
1:50 PM		COLL. 4 L&D			
2:20 PM	Advisory	Read Aloud	Read Aloud		
2:50 PM	Community Clean & Reflect				
LECTURE	AM: IND. READING	AM: 2000 CASE	AM:	AM:	
	AM:	AM:	AM:	AM:	
	PM: 35	PM: 3000 CASE	PM:	PM:	
	PM:	PM:	PM:	PM:	

Sample of a student-completed weekly schedule

Aligning learning experiences with desired learner outcomes

With the three pillars, **Embedded – Integrated – Learner-Centered**, forming the foundation for learning experiences at Embark Education, a clear next step was to clarify and articulate *who* they wanted students to become at Embark. With their design pillars and mission firmly in place, Embark Co-Director, Miguel Gonzalez, partnered with Learner-Centered Collaborative to develop a Learner Profile for students that would serve as a North Star and help align learning experiences with desired learner outcomes.

Through a collaborative process students, educators, and the community engaged in brainstorming, drafting, gathering feedback, and making revisions. It culminated with Embark Education presenting their **Learner Profile**, a set of six aspirational traits that Embark intends to cultivate in their learners over their three middle school years. Learners have opportunities to reflect on these traits on an ongoing basis and they form the framework through which educational experiences are designed.

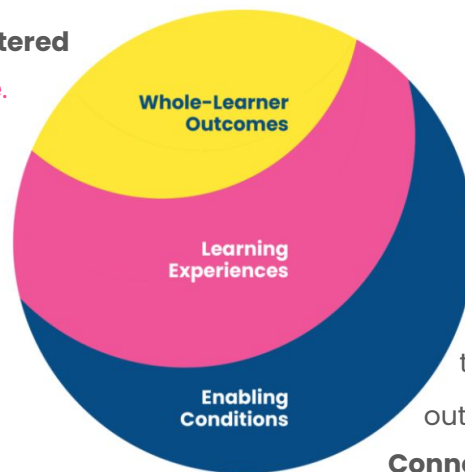


Embark Education's Learner Profile is a set of six aspirational traits they aim to cultivate in students during their middle school years.

Assessing Aspirational Traits

With clear and aligned Learning Experiences and Learner Outcomes, the next question Embark was still grappling with was around the Enabling Conditions, specifically: how might they provide feedback on and document growth of student learning in this model with large, aspirational learner outcomes?

Explore the **Learner-Centered Collaborative** framework [here](#).



The **Enabling Conditions** are key to supporting the learning experiences that lead to desired learner-centered outcomes. They address **Coherence, Connectedness, and Culture**.

The Enabling Conditions, a critical component of Learner-Centered Collaborative's framework, support the learning experiences that lead to desired learner-centered outcomes. They include **Coherence, Connectedness, and Culture**. In order for there to be coherence, there must be enabling policies such as grading and reporting that support the desired learning experiences and learner outcomes. Therefore, Embark educators aligned on a set of **Assessment Agreements** to serve as learner-centered guidelines to encourage competency-based assessment practices rather than strict grading policies.

ASSESSMENT AGREEMENTS

- I facilitate students' ability to **self-assess** and value their input in charting next steps.
- I **co-create** criteria for success with students.
- I set and reflect on **goals** with students.
- I create opportunities for students to provide **multiple pieces of evidence** of progress towards a competency.
- I create **authentic and embedded** assessment opportunities when appropriate.
- I allow for students to demonstrate mastery in a **variety of modalities/methods**.
- I provide opportunities for a **feedback and revision cycle**.

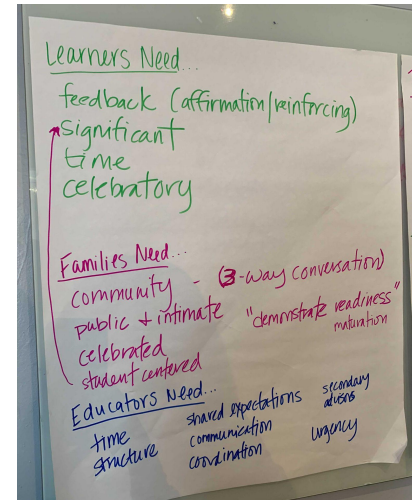
Defining Learner Competencies

In order to fully live into these assessment agreements educators further recognized the need to articulate **competencies** aligned to the Learner Profile. Embark Co-Director, Megan Parry, led the educators through a process to identify important interdisciplinary skills that students would need to build in order to work towards the Learner Profile. These formed the foundation for Embark's competencies. With the support of Learner-Centered Collaborative, educators made meaning of each competency, along with its individual indicators, and began incorporating them meaningfully into learning experiences. Embark's competencies are what they explicitly teach and provide feedback on so students can work on them in their daily life in preparation for reflecting on the Learner Profile. Learning experiences in the classroom, in the shops, and in the community are grounded in the competencies that students are working towards and educators and students alike reflect regularly on their progress towards these skills.



Embark students develop these competencies through classroom projects, their work in the shops, and their daily lives. They regularly reflect on their progress toward each competency and receive feedback from peers and educators.

Continuing to Focus on Coherence as an Enabling Condition



Artifacts from an Embark educator collaboration with Learner-Centered Collaborative to design a Demonstration of Learning Experience

Currently, in the 2021-22 school year, Embark is working with Learner-Centered Collaborative to collaboratively design a **Demonstration of Learning Experience** for students to reflect on and share their learning through the lens of the Learner Profile. This will continue to provide coherence as there will be aligned policies around graduation and credentialing to the Learner Profile and learning experiences. After an observational stage, in which community members, educators, and students shared what they want out of the experience, the educator team ideated and prototyped a Reflection and Sharing Experience. This experience will support 6th-8th grade learners to share their progress and growth throughout their learning journey at Embark, anchored in the Learner Profile. After a process of testing, reflection, and iteration in the spring of 2022, this experience will be fully implemented in the 2022-23 school year.



To connect and learn more about defining, designing, and realizing your learner-centered model, email collaborate@learnercentered.org