

Essential Life Skills

A business, an education, a family... These are titles that fit the Essential Life Skills program. For those lucky enough to be a part, it's much more than a class. It's a sum of people with a goal. It's an inspiring model on which to base future businesses. It's a place where authentic learning happens. This is a high school class that, when modeled, will affect positive change to our education system by encouraging entrepreneurship, teaching individual competencies, and creating an environment for students to be a part of something greater than themselves.

At the beginning of the school year, students decide on projects that they would like to pursue. These projects are the focus for the year, and although each year the projects have potential to change with new students, each project is set up and run like a business. This year's projects include selling microgreens, raising grass-fed and finished beef, and building a portable trailer for produce sales. In the microgreens project, a group of students grow, package, label, and sell their products to community stores, including Markus Foods and Third Street Market. In the grass-finished beef project, students contributed to each phase of the supply chain: raising the cattle, marketing, meeting with business owners, and eventually selling to local businesses. In the vegetable trailer project, our class is still in the "building stage" of the project, but upon completion, plans are to store and sell vegetables from the trailer.

These independent projects teach students the responsibilities of running a business, and also provide students with the chance to learn a new skill ranging anywhere from product and logo development to website and social media management. This class allows the students to decide what project they want to work on, and how they can contribute to their team. For example, some people like to handle the more technical aspects of a project, like logos and content development, while others would rather help with more hands-on jobs, like composting or planting seeds. A student might even choose to work on a completely different project and as

long as they are contributing and learning, a student is encouraged to find a project that works best for them.

In addition to personal independence, this class also focuses on teamwork and engagement. If a student finds that they are struggling, they can look to others for ideas and guidance on how to solve the issue. Individual thought and expression are encouraged first, but we realize that not everyone thrives as an independent worker and in these cases the students come together and help the individual find the best way to use his or her strengths for the team. For those students who are not project leaders, they contribute to the team by working on projects where they are needed. For example, our vegetable trailer is still in the process of being built, so we often have students from other projects come help us mill wood or assemble the trailer.

At the end of the day, this is a business with bonuses. Students are getting paid a wage, running projects like bosses, and gaining practical, real-life trade experience as well as agricultural knowledge. Richard Branson once said, "A business is simply an idea to make other people's lives better," and that's what our business is doing. We believe in healthy food and healthy living, and that's the message we are sending out to our community. Everyone can contribute to the bigger picture.