



EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICE:

EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AT HINSDALE HIGH SCHOOL

Tierney Iman¹, a graduate of Hinsdale High School, has a diagnosed intellectual disability.

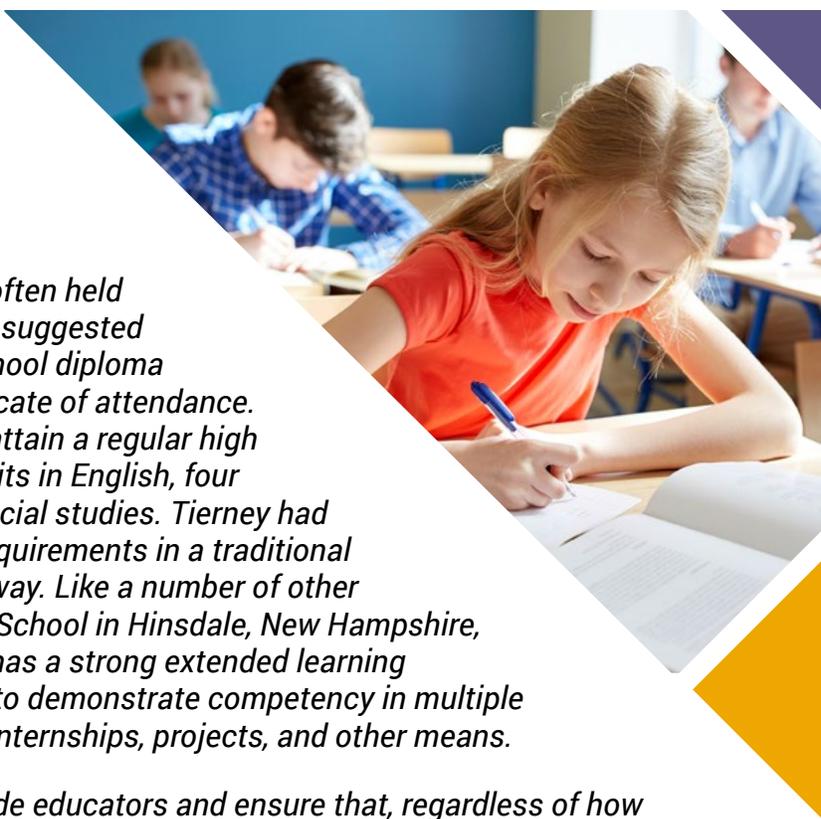
Unfortunately, Tierney and students like her are often held to lower expectations. Many schools might have suggested that Tierney couldn't achieve the regular high school diploma and should settle for a lesser diploma or a certificate of attendance. That's not what Tierney wanted—she wanted to attain a regular high school diploma, which requires at least four credits in English, four credits in math, and three and a half credits in social studies. Tierney had trouble demonstrating mastery in some of the requirements in a traditional classroom environment. She needed a different way. Like a number of other schools and districts in the state, Hinsdale High School in Hinsdale, New Hampshire, was equipped to help in this situation. Hinsdale has a strong extended learning opportunity (ELO) program that allows students to demonstrate competency in multiple ways—not just in a classroom, but also through internships, projects, and other means.

The district has developed a set of rubrics to guide educators and ensure that, regardless of how students choose to demonstrate a competency, their demonstration meets rigorous standards. What's more, this program is available to any student—those with disabilities and those without—and is customized for each student. Struggling and advanced students alike can attain credit for learning experiences outside of the classroom as long as they meet the high standards delineated in the district and school rubric. Having multiple ways to demonstrate competencies makes all the difference for Tierney and her peers who may struggle with the traditional model that uses paper and pencil assessments.

“I remember Tierney and her parents coming to us, adamant that Tierney must do what it takes to get the 20-credit diploma,” recalls Karen Thompson, the school's ELO coordinator. “It was a wake-up moment for us. We all looked at each other and thought, ‘Who are we to tell this student she can't?’” Quickly, Tierney, Karen Thompson, the civics teacher, the special education director, and the case manager got together to strategize ways the ELO project could be tailored for Tierney. What was initially designed to help Tierney demonstrate career competencies would need to be modified to enable her to demonstrate civic competencies. Tierney was already completing an internship at her local town hall, where all local government issues are handled. There she met with staff and helped them get ready for Election Day.

Tierney would use this experience to demonstrate mastery of specific state civic competencies, including “identifying the structures and functions of government,” “demonstrating responsible practices within the political process,” and “investigating how knowledgeable and engaged citizens have acted to extend liberties.” By the end of her project, Tierney's work at the town hall and interactions with professionals in the field had not only enabled her to objectively demonstrate these competencies, but also led her to register her parents to vote—as well as cast her own vote for the first time. In the spring of 2016, Tierney walked across the podium with her peers and received her 20-credit diploma, knowing objectively that she had done the work and mastered the skills represented by that diploma.

¹ In this instance and throughout the rest of the text, the student's name has been changed to protect privacy.



THE VISION: SUCCESS IN COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE

The staff at Hinsdale operate on the belief that being located in a small rural area should not limit the opportunities of their students, whether they have a disability or not. The school board and others knew that schools in different communities might have access to more resources, course offerings, and staff, but they didn't want to use their constraints as an excuse: They knew that if their students were to succeed, they would have to demonstrate all the same knowledge, skills, and dispositions as any other student in the state or country. This vision and sense of purpose led the school to take part in work happening across New Hampshire around competency-based education, an approach to learning that allows students to demonstrate competency in ways other than traditional classroom settings. As the school and district headed into a new accreditation cycle, Hinsdale took an unusual step for a small rural district: They hired a full time ELO coordinator to help take learning beyond the classroom. Hinsdale wanted to provide all learners—whether advanced or struggling, with a disability or without—multiple and diverse learning opportunities that would engage and inspire them to succeed in college, career, and civic life.

THE STRATEGY: EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

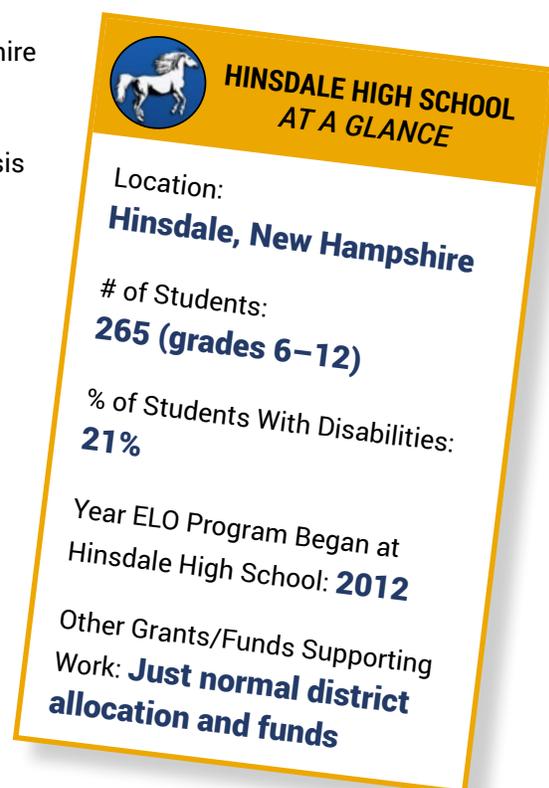
ELOs are uniquely suited to help the district achieve its vision. As defined in [state code](#), extended learning opportunities are experiences that “provide credit or supplement regular academic courses” and that “promote the school’s and individual student’s educational goals and objectives.”

This approach to learning received a boost in 2008, when the New Hampshire State Board of Education established a policy in support of the state’s competency-based education effort, divorcing “seat time” from the credits students must accumulate toward graduation. This placed further emphasis on the importance of ELOs to the overall quality of student learning experiences statewide. A [recent study](#) evaluating this initiative found that more than 6,200 ELOs have been completed by students in the state, including experiences such as independent research projects, electives, internships, and/or online courses. A [separate study](#) found that when compared to students not participating in ELOs, students participating in school-facilitated ELOs² were more likely to:

- Accumulate credits and be on track to graduate
- Score higher on the SATs
- Enroll in college

What’s more, previously low-performing students fared even better than their peers in school-facilitated ELOs and 10 to 15 percent of these students had identified disabilities.

² Data was most conclusive for school-facilitated ELOs. Students participating in virtual ELOs (ELOs completed online) were more likely than their peers to take the SATs, but fared worse on other outcomes, including average daily attendance and being on track to graduate from high school. Some of these negative findings were more pronounced for economically disadvantaged (average daily attendance) and academically low-achieving (out-of-school suspensions) students. There were no significant correlations for students participating in virtual ELOs and other outcomes.



**HINSDALE HIGH SCHOOL
AT A GLANCE**

Location:
Hinsdale, New Hampshire

of Students:
265 (grades 6–12)

% of Students With Disabilities:
21%

Year ELO Program Began at
Hinsdale High School: **2012**

Other Grants/Funds Supporting
Work: **Just normal district
allocation and funds**

IMPLEMENTING ELOs AT HINSDALE HIGH SCHOOL

At Hinsdale, whether a participating student has a disability or not, every ELO must meet four criteria^A:

1. **Research:** Every student must learn about and research the topic they've chosen as their ELO and think through the best means to present their learning (PowerPoint, research paper, etc.).
2. **Reflection:** Students must engage in active reflection on their ELO experience through journals, classroom discussions, and other methods.
3. **Product:** Student work must lead to some tangible product beyond a paper-and-pencil examination and can take many forms, such as a persuasive letter or an artistic representation of work.
4. **Presentation:** Students must be able to present their work and demonstrate mastery of the specific, pre-determined competencies they were focusing on.

EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In practice, implementing an ELO for a student with a disability requires more connections: between educators, case managers, and parents; between ELO goals and a student's IEP goals; and between students and their ELO site, as they self-advocate and disclose information about their disability as necessary. While many of these connections will undoubtedly have to be made for students without disabilities, they are critically important to ensuring that students with disabilities have successful experiences with ELOs. Hinsdale and other districts have

identified one of the most important determinants of success to be the existence of a dedicated ELO coordinator who can help manage relationships with community partners and support students through their experience. In the case of Hinsdale, that work falls on the school's ELO coordinator, Karen Thompson, who helped manage the connections and meetings that made Tierney's experience possible.

“There's never a typical project in an ELO. There's no right or wrong project.”

*– Karen Thompson, ELO Coordinator,
Hinsdale High School*

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

For Tierney and other students with disabilities, there are many potential benefits to participating in ELOs. But even these benefits don't come automatically. They require effort and attention by the school. Below we identify three of those benefits for students like Tierney, and the requirements Hinsdale staff must meet in order to ensure that there is a system in place to realize these benefits.

Key Benefits of ELOs

- Because ELOs emphasize content knowledge across disciplines (in addition to skills and dispositions), they promote collaboration between case managers, educators (in specific content areas), parents, and others to ensure that students will be prepared to meet the requirements of their ELO.
- ELOs provide a framework that encourages students to establish goals for their learning. This may be an added benefit for students—especially those with disabilities—who may not have developed clear plans and goals for the future.
- ELOs offer an environment in which students are provided multiple ways to access learning. This is often a good fit for students who learn and demonstrate their learning differently.



Key Challenges of ELOs for Students With Disabilities

- Knowledge about the student's needs could sit with many different actors in the school (case managers, special educators, or educators who teach a specific content area). A dedicated system is required to ensure that these individuals are collaborating in their efforts to support the ELO experience.
- Some students with disabilities may not have experienced self-driven learning and may have a harder time adjusting to and thriving in ELOs. Staff must be ready to support students as they gain the skills they need, including self-awareness and agency.
- It is important that school team members hold high standards for students with disabilities as they pursue ELOs, and avoid watering down expectations in an effort to protect students from potential challenges. This risk can be mitigated by establishing a common, rigorous rubric that the team of educators can use to evaluate all students' experiences and work, whether they have a disability or not.



CONCLUSION

At Hinsdale, success boils down to two commitments:

1. Creating a system—at the outset—with a focus on inclusiveness, individualization, and supports for all students
2. Offering flexibility to honor student voice and choice and address issues as they arise

For Tierney, these commitments enabled her to pursue a rigorous learning experience that was adjusted as needed to meet her specific and dynamic learning goals and needs. These commitments help prepare all students for college, career, and civic demands of the 21st century and allow *all* students to reach their full potential.



^Δ For more information, see: <http://education.nh.gov/innovations/elo/documents/ResearchReflectionProductandPresentation.pdf>