

K-6 Field Experiences for Students at Edith Bowen Laboratory School Celebrated in Photo Exhibit

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Eric Newell, Director of Experiential Learning at EBLs

“Headwaters: Sources of Wonder,” a photographic exhibition that features the field experiences of K-6 school children attending Edith Bowen Laboratory School (EBLS), is currently on display in the Lyndsley Wilkerson Gallery. The gallery is located on the first floor in the Sorenson Legacy Foundation Center for Clinical Excellence housed in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at USU. The exhibit is open to the public Monday through Friday from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM and will run through May 30.

The photographs on display are the creative work of Eric Newell, director of experiential learning at EBLs since 2015. During his high school years, Newell wanted to be an outdoor photographer, but he ultimately found his way to the elementary classroom, where he has combined his passion for being in and photographing the outdoors with educating children. “I love trying to capture the magic of these moments. I love capturing the learning,” he said.

Newell has spent his career developing meaningful curriculum-based outdoor learning opportunities for students. These experiences build confidence, nurture relationships, foster mental and physical wellbeing, and give purpose and context to curriculum standards. They are also a source of great joy.

“This exhibit provides visitors with an opportunity to see and feel what students at Edith Bowen experience,” said EBLs Principal Nate Justis. “We value the power of place and consider it almost a co-teacher with our students’ classroom teachers. Dr. Newell provides invaluable guidance at EBLs in our pursuit of high-quality, place-based learning and his photos showcase exquisitely the power of this principle.”

At EBLs, Newell arranges field experiences for large and small groups of students of every grade for some 120 days a year (75% of the days the students attend school). Students go birdwatching at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, ice fishing at Hyrum Dam State Park, cross country skiing in Blacksmith Fork Canyon, canoeing at Benson Marina and Little Bear River, snowshoeing at Cutler Marsh, and hiking to the summit of Naomi Peak. For many years, Newell has also worked closely with researchers at Hardware Ranch Wildlife Management Area, where students feed the elk and have assisted in an invasive weed project.

Generally, the field experiences Newell arranges are a 10- to 15-minute drive from the school, but special out-of-town experiences are scheduled yearly for the fifth and sixth grade students. These include a four-day visit at the Teton Science School in Grand Teton National Park (a tradition for EBLs students for the past 35 years) for fifth graders and a five-day guided tour on the San Juan River in southern Utah that serves as the capstone experience for sixth graders. Photographs of students participating in each of these field experiences and more are showcased at the exhibit.

Newell is a three-time USU alum. He received a bachelor’s degree in elementary education in 1998 and a master’s in elementary education in 2003, which included a strong emphasis on coursework in the Quinney College of Natural Resources. The research for his Ph.D. in 2018 focused on outdoor experiential learning in public school settings. Between degrees, he taught elementary school and middle school in Logan School District for 18 years before coming to Edith Bowen Laboratory School.

When visitors enter the gallery, Newell is confident they’ll experience something special. “These photographs have been a great tool for administrators, board members, and parents to see some amazing moments,” said Newell. “That’s what I’m trying to capture—the joy and magic of being outside and what it does to kids.”

An ongoing education fund for the experiential learning program at EBLs was recently created by Wesley and Lorinda Mortensen. Their children and Wesley

(albeit several decades earlier) attended elementary school at EBLS. The couple recognize the value of the outdoor experiences their own children enjoyed and have created the fund to enable the program to continue well into the future. “As parents of young children, we prioritized outdoor experiences year-round, even bundling up our kids daily for a dose of fresh air in the frigid winters of Minnesota and Cache Valley,” recalls Lorinda. “Through significant experiences outside, they learned for themselves what research has shown—children that learn outdoors experience improved academics and focus, increased cooperative learning, and more meaningful social interactions.” To contribute to the fund, visit the [EBLS Give](#) page.