

SUPERINTENDENT'S OFFICE
4675 MISSOURI FLAT ROAD
PLACERVILLE CA 95667

CONTACT
MATT BARNES, EL DORADO HIGH SCHOOL
530.622-3634, EXT 1016

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Four Years in the Making the Natural Resource Program Gets High Fives

In the 2006–07 school year, the El Dorado Union High School District's Land Management and Natural Resources program was conceived as a result of the District's strategic planning goals calling for meaningful learning activities and the development of Career Technical programs. The program design would provide students with a rigorous, real-world relevance to the core curriculum while utilizing the local environment and natural resources as a venue for learning. The program would also connect students with local businesses, community-based organizations, and governmental agencies, and provide them with educational and service opportunities.

The execution of the plan was realized with the award of a \$35,000 California Secondary School Planning Grant to support the planning phase of the program, followed by a 3-year implementation grant totaling more than \$180,000 in appropriations. El Dorado High School Assistant Principal Matt Barnes was assigned to take the lead to further program development, with support from Principal Jerry Smith and AP Environmental Science/Physics teacher Tobias Gautschi and Biology/Natural Resources teacher Kevin Potter. At a cost of more than \$2.5 million to construct the facility, the District applied for state matching funds to convert the District's old Pondorado school site in Camino to a research center that would house the program. The District's matching funds would come from the voter-approved Measure Q bond.

The master plan included not only the construction of a 2,856 sq ft research center, but also several outdoor experimental plots, sheltered outdoor workspace, a research-based greenhouse, a technical data analysis center, and communication capabilities for the campus. The old Pondorado site has been renamed to El Dorado East Campus. The construction phase of the project is now underway, with anticipated completion this summer.

The Land Management and Natural Resources program curriculum spans 4 years of course work and integrates land, water, and air management; natural resource management; agribusiness; and recreation. The program also features two science elective courses, California Natural Resources I and II, that would engage students in conducting original research pertinent to existing environmental debates while integrating it into the core academic subjects. The curriculum also includes stewardship of the local environment and serves as a model for future academic and workforce partnerships within the District. Students who participate in this program would attain the skills and critical thinking necessary to make informed decisions about environmental issues, land use, and employment opportunities.

The Land Management and Natural Resources program, however, became much more popular than administrators would realize. At the program's debut, 120 incoming freshmen applied for

the 35 initial openings. Teacher recommendations and written applications were used to determine entrance into the program. Thus far, El Dorado High School Natural Resource program students have done very well in their class and have risen to the challenges of this new program. According to Barnes, the program is now in its second year, and they are in the process of selecting their third group of students. He states that, "This is becoming a difficult process as the program clearly has gained popularity and, thus, has seen a sustained level of enthusiasm." Barnes notes that students are completing work on an orchard site that will also house some garden elements. They have also completed the work and presentations of site development plans, a yearly process to drive the program's land-based decisions.

Students in the program will also take annual field trips to places such as the Watershed Education Summit (WES), the American River, and Pt. Reyes, among other sites. "These trips will offer unique hands on learning experiences," says Barnes, "Students become so connected to their teachers, classes, and school that they often refer to the Natural Resources classes more like family than a class. They are asked to work hard together, often beyond normal school hours. By doing this, they have created relationships of mutual respect and great friendships." The program will see its first set of graduates next year. Barnes emphasizes that, "This program has a bright future and will continue to offer our students a great opportunity and experience."

Barnes further notes that a big part of this program is local business and community involvement. "Our partnerships are the best," he claims, "and this program could not be as successful without our community partners."

Superintendent Sherry Smith notes that, "Everyone involved with the program is very excited with its success and that the work now underway is helping to transform the Camino site into a world-class facility. As the Natural Resources program continues to grow, we look forward to exploring ways to include other students and sites. There are numerous programs that could collaborate with the Natural Resource program. This collaboration will add great relevance and connections for students. It's a great program and an outstanding opportunity for our students."

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