

SUMMIT

REAL-WORLD LEARNING

WATERSHED SCHOOL

NAIS THE INNOVATION KITCHEN



WATERSHED SCHOOL

SCHOOL
Watershed School
Boulder, CO

GRADE LEVELS
6-12

PRESENTERS
Greg Bamford
Head of School

HISTORY

Founders Jason Berv and Sumaya Abu-Haidar, two freshly minted Ph.Ds from the CU Boulder School of Education, had a realization: Most of the research about learning isn't reflected in the way most schools work. In 2004, they launched a new, innovative school founded on current research about how children really learn. They called the school Watershed because it would create "watershed moments" in the lives of its students.

"You know you're working in a special place when you not only find yourself side by side with your students, learning and exploring together, but you come to a point where a student launches forward and is suddenly teaching you."
JEFF OSGOOD, EDUCATOR

"In the year and a half that she has been at Watershed, my daughter has found passion, friendship, comfort, and support. She is excited to learn and share her knowledge with us. She thinks in a much bigger picture and connects ideas and concepts. She takes risks and is proud of her efforts and wants to excel."
WATERSHED PARENT

"At Watershed, I want to come to school every day."
WATERSHED STUDENT

IDEAS

- ▶ **INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPEDITIONS** connect science, language arts, and social studies to real-world problems and facilitate both on- and off-campus learning. For example, using essential questions — such as "How will China shape the 21st century?" — frames learning around relevance.
- ▶ **SHARED LANGUAGE FOR CHARACTER TRAITS** create a consistent language for emphasizing development of noncognitive traits such as empathy, grit, and self-control.
- ▶ **PROTOTYPING A "LAYERED TRANSCRIPT"** in Google Docs allows families and students to move from narrative assessment to student rubrics to evidence of learning.
- ▶ **CROSS-POLLINATING WITH OTHER EDUCATORS OCCURS** through Educator Visit Days, teacher expeditions to other schools, and our annual Traverse Conference.

IMPLEMENTATION

- ▶ Culture beats strategy. Most of our innovation comes from scaling small faculty initiatives rather than predetermined administrative plans. Authorize faculty to try things without administrative signoff.
- ▶ Use a clear sense of mission to attract families and faculty who believe in what you do, and deter families and faculty who may not fully buy in to your program. Be clear about the trade-offs with both constituencies.
- ▶ Create consistent language to talk to each other and outsiders about what you do and why.
- ▶ Connect with other schools and import new ideas that have been road-tested elsewhere.
- ▶ Most schools and education programs don't intentionally build flexibility, collaboration, or creativity. When hiring, look for markers that signify a sense of adventure, nonlinear career paths, or an appetite for creative disobedience.

IMPERATIVE

The way most schools work doesn't work for most kids. Student engagement drops consistently with each year that students are in school — from 75 percent in fifth grade down to 34 percent by 12th grade. We want students to be more than college-bound: We want them to feel connected to other humans, engaged in their learning, intrinsically motivated, and able to pursue areas of passion. We believe that relevance and community are keys to unlocking engagement.



RESOURCES

WEBSITE
www.watershedschool.org
TWITTER
[@watershed_co](https://twitter.com/watershed_co)

RAILROAD BASE FPO