

ELIZABETHTON HIGH SCHOOL

(ELIZABETHTON, TENNESSEE)

Public school

Summer 2019



A DEEPER DIVE

In January 2016, 23 students filed into Alex Campbell's sociology class at Elizabethton High School in Elizabethton, a small town of about 15,000 people in the far-northeastern corner of Tennessee. What happened next would change the future of their school, their community, and their own lives. The previous fall, Campbell and two fellow teachers had heard about the XQ Super School competition. The three of them often got together to discuss the problems of the current school system and to imagine what a better way might look like. "We decided," Campbell recalled, "that we wanted to quit complaining, and take up the challenge of creating a school." The three teachers submitted a short concept description to XQ in December 2015. But then they got to thinking: The school they imagined would be, first and foremost, a place where the voices of students would be heard, respected, and heeded; where education would be driven by students' interests and passions, with the right guidance to ensure deep, rigorous learning. So why not start to create that kind of experience immediately? Why not use the competition itself as a learning opportunity?

And so, in January, Campbell presented the challenge to his students as a semester-long class project with real implications. He proposed that they take over the application: Conduct the research, do the background reading, design a school, and write the plan themselves. Were they up for it? They were—and so the work began. The students studied everything, from the history of public education, to brain science, to school finance. They headed out to talk with people in every corner of their district and community. And they decided to call their school Bartleby, in honor of the character in Herman Melville's classic short story. Students were influenced by Bartleby and his decision to not do things that went against his conscience, even when it went against social expectations. When they finally hit "Send" to submit their application, they had this to say about their school design:

"The thing about Bartleby is that it is a school for high school students, totally created by high school students. Our teacher gave us this assignment, and we have done all of the research and work to create it."

AT A GLANCE

The Bartleby Program at Elizabethton High School got its start as a school-design proposal submitted to the XQ Super School competition by a class of students at Elizabethton High School. The program works to elevate student voice in Elizabethton City Schools. Growing from just 24 students in two courses in 2017-18, enrollment grew in 2018-19, with hopes of implementing the program more widely in the 900-plus student high school in 2019-20.

XQ Director:
Alex Campbell

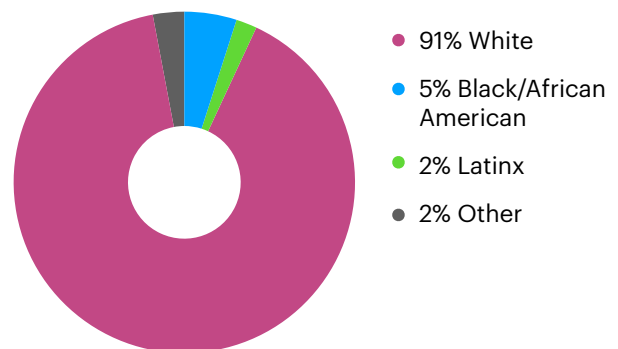
Principal:
Jonathan Minton

Deputy Director of Schools:
Dr. Myra Newman

Co-Founding Teacher:
Dustin Hensley

Students of Elizabethton

2018-19 Enrollment: 865 Students



27%
Qualify for free or reduced price lunch

14%
Qualify for special education services

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A DEEPER DIVE CONTINUED

"It is absurd that no one ever asks the students what they want, need, or desire in a school. The adults always just assume they know, then force it on the students. This school is different. This school is by the students and for the students."

Their school design didn't win the overall competition, but their proposal stood out as an exemplar of student voice, for which the team earned special recognition from XQ. There are important lessons in the accomplishments of the Elizabethton students. First, students have plenty of drive and motivation to do complex, multidisciplinary work. Second, they're oriented toward the future, but they're also deeply grounded in the realities of their community. Third, they want to contribute to their community through real-world learning with a purpose. And one more thing: Students are not satisfied with waiting for somebody else to change the world; they'd prefer to go ahead and do it themselves. Those insights form the core of the Bartleby Program at Elizabethton High School.

In 2017-18, the school created two new Bartleby electives for juniors and seniors: A fall course on Community Improvement, and a spring course on Entrepreneurship. Each was co-taught by two teachers, who work together to guide students in designing and carrying out ambitious, real-world projects. The classes were open to any students, but getting in required an interview with a panel of teachers and community leaders (who served as mentors, coaches, and project evaluators throughout the course). According to Dustin Hensley, a school librarian (and one of the original Bartleby founders who is co-teaching the Community Improvement course), they looked for commitment, passion and work ethic—not just a high GPA or a history of acing every test. In the Community Improvement class, students worked with a group of local leaders, including the police chief, the director of public library, the tourism director, and a professor at a local university. Students dove immediately into their research, searching for problems in their region that needed solutions. Once they developed an initial idea, they took their proposal to the responsible person—a city government official, perhaps, or the head of a local nonprofit—and asked for their collaboration. Projects ranged from developing an augmented-reality version of a historic

downtown walking tour, to creating more engaging clubs for local middle-school students.

In the Entrepreneurship course, a group of local businesspersons helped to select students, and worked with them, as mentors, throughout the semester. To gain a spot in the class, students pitched a business idea, or full business plan. One student who had already worked as a graphic designer did such a good job that he was hired on the spot by two members of the selection committee and went on to design graphics for the Bartleby Program. Each participating student was eligible for \$500 in seed money to start or grow their business. A Bartleby student won \$1,000 in First Tennessee Development District's Shark Tank with her idea to start a delivery service of farm-fresh, locally-grown foods to customers' homes. She was one of nearly 300 participating from eight counties across Tennessee.

The school design the students created was all about student voice and—in Elizabethton—students are being heard. The local school board now includes a student member, and the district has created a new position for a director of community partnerships. The barriers between the high school and the surrounding community are coming down. And within the school, the Community Improvement and Entrepreneurship classes are making a big impression. Inspired by the positive impact of the program in its first year, the Elizabethton School District will begin expanding the program throughout the district's single high school in 2018-19. As adults in the building observed the evolution from quiet and shy students to poised and confident students excelling as leaders, interest in expanding the program beyond the original 24 students organically grew.

To ensure all Elizabethton High School students get an early taste of the Bartleby experience, all freshmen will participate in a new immersive freshman orientation called the Bartleby Cyclone Experience. The goal is for students to develop emotional intelligence and social awareness, self-awareness and self-management, goal-setting, servant leadership skills, and transformational leadership skills so that students will be even more successful during their years at EHS.

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To reverse the trend of decreased academic rigor of senior level courses and to improve the likelihood of success in college, EHS will transition all 12th grade courses to Bartleby Senior Capstone Courses. This will help make senior year valuable and stimulating by offering project-based, experiential, blended and real-world knowledge in all courses. Beginning in 2018-19, EHS offers 13 new 4th period enrichment courses. These were created through the combined efforts of EHS guidance counselors, Guidance Office, teachers throughout EHS who have a passion for wanting to teach new and valuable courses, EHS administrators, and a student survey.

In Elizabethton, students and adults are working together to rethink high school. Adults throughout the community are seeing high school students as valuable contributors. In late fall of 2017, the Bartleby Program was rewarded as Community Heroes for their efforts in supporting local organizations, businesses, and individuals. Out of 25,000 entrants across the country, four Elizabethton High School students won NPR's first-ever Student Podcast Challenge. Their entry was created as part of an integrated language arts and U.S. history project which was piloted this year, showing the success of the model for the entire school and beyond. Adults throughout the community are seeing high school students as valuable contributors. If grassroots, classroom-to-community change like that can happen in his town, Hensley believes it can happen in any community in America.