

# Southwest Open School



## Employee Handbook

# 2025-2026

**Greetings and thank you for taking the time to read this handbook.**

**First, a short description of our school. Southwest Open School (SWOS) is a public charter school located in Cortez, Colorado. SWOS was created in 1986 by the Southwest Board of Cooperative Services as a second chance program for dropouts and teen parents. After reorganization in 1998, SWOS became a charter school with Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1 serving as its authorizing agent (LEA). Currently, SWOS serves approximately 135 students, ages 14-21, with more than 90% of students defined as "at-risk," according to Colorado Department of Education's (CDE) risk factors. The student population at SWOS is ethnically diverse with approximately 35% Native American, 50% Caucasian, and 15% Hispanic. SWOS serves students from four school districts in the Four Corners area: Montezuma-Cortez RE-1, Dolores RE-4A, Dolores County RE-2J, and Mancos RE-6. SWOS also serves students from the Ute Mountain Ute reservation in Colorado (Towaoc) and Utah, and Navajo reservations in New Mexico and Arizona.**

**Hints for working at SWOS:**

Remember that we are working with young people who may have had serious struggles with a variety of life's facets: education, family, economics, authority, substances, relationships, and others.

We can help the students by:

- Welcoming them as they are
- Encouraging them to do their best
- Choosing "battles" judiciously and avoiding unnecessary argument or power struggles
- Redirecting inappropriate behavior fairly, but firmly
- Allowing them the time and space they need to trust us
- Helping them if they don't understand
- Expecting them to complete quality work
- Looking beyond tough, false exteriors to see the true person
- Modeling positive behaviors and problem-solving techniques

We can help ourselves by:

- Seeking support and guidance from our peers
- Keeping a sense of humor
- Breathing, exercising, eating, hydrating, sleeping well....etc.
- Remembering that success for us and our students might develop in small, faltering steps
- Resolving our own conflicts in constructive, thoughtful ways

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?..."*

*Marianne Williamson*

*"When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hang on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time the tide will turn."*

*Harriet Beecher Stowe*


*"I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized."*

*Haim Ginott*

## **Expectations, norms, and policies:**

### **Instructional Staff**

#### **In the Classroom:**


- **Advising or Community:** Each teacher acts as an advisor or "community" teacher for a group of students. The students placed in an advising/community remain with the teacher throughout their career at SWOS. A student may only change communities once and this must be approved by all parties including the director. Your responsibilities as a community advisor include the following:
  - Develop relationships with each student to support them with their academic, as well as social/emotional success at SWOS.
  - Serve as an advocate for each student in a variety of settings.
  - Attend IEP meetings, disciplinary meetings, etc. as appropriate.
  - Serve as an academic advisor for each student, helping them with scheduling their classes, concurrent enrollment, and postsecondary workforce readiness (specifically Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAPs) on the College in Colorado website and their Individual Plans for Success).
  - Support students in developing and completing their portfolios.
  - Assist students in hosting Governance (see below).
  - Deliver SEL/Swosology content on a weekly basis
- **Academic and Elective Classes:** Each teacher plans and teaches classes in their assigned content area. Teachers are provided ample freedom in their class design, but they are expected to use the Colorado State Standards, and NWEA RIT scores in the development of their classes. Staff will use the  Project Planner <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EqssTF8xSyt-EKW8oaaAoBfLNsnsFrope5yve-2UztA/edit?>

tab=t.0 to plan for their classes. Completed project planners are due before the beginning of each class. Additionally, there are numerous templates, resources, and materials that the staff can use to guide their class and lesson planning. Additional resources are available upon request. Classes are not leveled according to grade, but rather by houses: lower house (0-7 credits), middle house (7-14 credits), and upper house (14-26 credits) all house advancements are based on portfolio completion/presentations. Credit numbers are approximate.


- **Fall, Winter and Spring Intensives:** During the fall, winter and spring intensives, students and teachers are together in one class all day, every day for the three week duration of the intensive. Teachers who are new to SWOS generally teach SWOSology, an introductory character education course for new students, with a partner for their first intensive. Intensives are often multi-disciplinary, offering multiple content credits, and are typically not single-house classes. Teachers are encouraged to take trips during intensives.
  - **Semester classes:** First semester classes begin after the fall intensive. There are six blocks per day with all teachers instructing for three core content blocks, facilitating a reading class and community class, and with one prep period. A yearlong schedule of classes is typically created by an administrator outlining the subject area and block times. Each teacher develops the curriculum for their classes. The second semester begins in January after the winter break.
  - **Student tracking and reporting:** SWOS uses ALMA, a student information system, to track and record attendance, grades, progress, etc. Instructions for using ALMA and attendance policies are provided in the ALMA section.
  - **Grading:** At the end of each term, student grades are recorded in ALMA Gradebook. Instructions for grading are provided by the administrator.
  - **Progress Reports:** Student progress reports are completed two weeks into the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> quarters of both the fall and spring semester. These reports entered into the comment section of ALMA.
  - **Data Driven Culture:** Teachers utilize NWEA test data to identify where students are performing at and in order to differentiate instruction. NWEA RIT band analysis is a required part of unit planning.
  - **Clean and Orderly Classrooms:** As a SWOS teacher, we expect you to do your best to create a healthy, friendly learning environment for your students. Part of your responsibilities includes keeping your classroom clean to reduce the risk of germs and bacteria from spreading. Furthermore, please consider the following elements of your classroom to create a safe, trauma-informed, and comfortable environment.
    - Add a plant, a water feature, pictures of beautiful vistas, and images of nature (e.g., animals, weather, flowers)
    - Add positive messages in large print on walls
    - Reduce clutter and organizing materials
    - Have clear spaces for student use classroom materials, spot for students to turn in materials, and an area where students can store their own graded materials
    - Open windows and allow as much natural light as possible
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### **All staff**

#### **Outside the classroom:**

- **Overnight trips:** Each staff member is encouraged to take at least one overnight trip with one of their classes per year. These trips are crucial for building rapport, campus culture, and generating important learning experiences.  
<https://southwestopenschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Compensatory-Time-Off-.pdf>
  - **Wilderness First Aid:** Staff members are expected to have WFA certification to lead back/front country trips. SWOS will pay for this training if the staff member needs the certification. This certification is also needed for driving SWOS transportation.
- **Outside Duty:** Teams of staff members are assigned to be outside before and after school, during breaks, and during lunchtime for one day per week to keep the peace and monitor behavior. If the staff member will be gone for the day they are assigned duty, the person is responsible for finding a substitute for “duty”.  **Duty Schedule**
- **Vehicle Duty:** Staff members are responsible for performing vehicle checks before use of a SWOS vehicle. Staff members are responsible for cleaning and locking the buses after use.
- **Staff Meetings:** Staff meetings are held every other Monday from 4:00PM - 5:00PM. Staff meetings are facilitated by a rotating schedule of staff teams. One person from the team leads the meeting, and one records the minutes from the meeting. The staff meeting time is structured to provide time for announcements and discussion. Special staff projects are also completed during this time. Staff meeting minutes are recorded and placed in the appropriate google folder.
- **Evening events:** Throughout the year, several school events occur during evening hours. Staff members are expected to attend these events, which include, but are not limited to SWOSology parent nights, dances, galleries, art shows, portfolio presentations, graduation and staff retreats. These are events that are fundamental to the school culture and provide opportunities to build relationships with students, parents, peers, board members and community.
- **Governance:** Every week (Tuesday), an all school meeting called Governance is organized and hosted by one of the community groups, in accordance with a schedule rotation. Governance is held on the field on the west side of the SWOS campus, or via zoom. Communities are expected to organize and host an activity for the entire school. Announcements are also made during this time, following this pattern: Staff, Student, Student Council, and then Post-Trip announcements. A reading is done by one of the students to begin Governance. On Governance days, we follow a modified schedule that is posted in each room.

#### **Student Norms/Expected Behaviors:**

The  **2025-2026 Student Handbook** details most of the expectations for student behavior. Students learn about the SWOS norms and expectations in the SWOSology class. These expectations are briefly outlined below. It is the expectation that all staff will participate in

upholding the norms, educating students about expected behaviors, intervening in the case a behavior violation is observed, and logging inappropriate behaviors in a timely fashion:

- **6 Ps:** Polite, Participate, Prompt, Produce, Positive Mental Attitude, Prepared are the fundamental school norms. These are introduced in SWOSology and reinforced throughout the SWOS community.
- **Smoking, cigarettes, tobacco:** SWOS is a tobacco-free campus and all school related events are also expected to be tobacco free. We ask students, staff, and visitors to leave campus if they need to smoke or use tobacco. We ask students to keep their cigarettes out of sight while they are on campus. Serious consequences exist for students who use tobacco on campus or at school events.
- **Alcohol and other drugs:** SWOS is a drug-free campus. SWOS works to provide wrap-around support for students who use alcohol or other drugs on campus, or who come to school having used these substances (see Alternative to Suspension (ATS) Flow Chart in the Student Behavior section).
- **Weapons:** State law prohibits anyone from having weapons on campus.
- **Fighting:** SWOS has no tolerance for fighting. Physical and verbal fighting is not allowed at SWOS. We try to create a safe environment for all students by having zero tolerance for fighting and harassment. Serious consequences exist for students who fight on or off campus. When conflicts occur between students, we aim for peaceful resolutions, which might include mediations with the students, the director, the counselor, advisors, classroom teachers and other involved parties.
- **Dress Code:** Few restrictions exist regarding how students dress. Bandanas and other clothing representing or “flying” gang colors are not allowed. Teachers sometimes ask students to change clothing that is particularly insulting or egregious. Teachers often ask students to dress appropriately on field trips out into the community or when visitors are expected. Hats are allowed. Students with clothing smelling of controlled substances will also be asked to change clothes.
- **Language:** Students are asked to use respectful, appropriate, formal language at SWOS. We ask that students do not use profanity in the classroom, on campus, or on field trips. We ask students to avoid discriminatory language that would be insulting in relation to race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and other diversity issues.
- **Music/headphones/Cell phones:** Classroom music is at the discretion of the teacher. Most teachers ask students to take off their headphones during discussions and classroom activities, but allow headphones during work time. Music and headphones are not to be used during governance or other public community events. Cell phones are not to be used in the classroom, at community events, or when visitors are in the classrooms.
- **Respect for school and other people’s property:** We ask students to respect school property and the property of others. We encourage everyone to clean up their own

messes in the lunchroom and kitchens, to avoid littering, and to, generally, be responsible for themselves.

- **Attending class:** Students are expected to be in their classes during class time. If they have no valid reason, or, after encouragement, do not return to class, they are logged by an administrator and parents are contacted. When classes leave campus for field trips, the students who aren't on the field trip are asked to leave campus (parents are contacted).
- **Dogs:** Therapy Dogs are allowed on campus if prior accommodations have been made and approved by the director.

### Developing and Planning Classes:

- **Class Planning:** At SWOS, teachers create their own class designs and lesson plans. There are a number of resources available to teachers to assist with planning classes, including a class project planner template. Teachers are expected to turn in their class planners to the Executive Director prior to the beginning of the new term. The due dates are specified on the yearly staff professional growth plan.
- **Class Costs**
  - **Purchase Orders and requests for checks:** You can use purchase orders and make requests for purchases based on your plan. Fill out a purchase order request sheet for items that need to be ordered or picked up at local stores. These purchase order sheets can be found in the office. The business manager needs 24 hours before credit cards can be handed out. The director approves the request before the items are ordered or picked up.
  - **Office supplies:** Most office supplies are available in the copy/work room in the Dolores building. We keep this door locked during the day and we supervise students who go in to use the copier or get supplies. Ask the office if you need other supplies.
- **Peer Feedback/Critiques:** As you plan your classes, plan peer critique/feedback sessions with your house partner teacher.
- **Portfolio Items:** Students complete a series of portfolio items that demonstrate learning as they progress through their classes. In each class that is taught, teachers should plan for students to create a portfolio item that is required for that content area. When these portfolio items are completed it is ultimately the responsibility of the student to add it to their online portfolio. However, teachers should provide the time and space to support student efforts in building their portfolios. Typically, at least one day at the end of each class will be dedicated to portfolio updates, revision, and reflection.
- **Teacher Portfolios:** It is recommended that teachers keep a portfolio of each class taught. Items in their portfolio could include class planning templates, activity explanations and worksheets, narrative evaluation, exemplars of student work, reflections on classes, and other documents that might help you improve your teaching.
- **Travel at SWOS:**

- Follow ALL the trip procedures outlined in the Risk Management protocols.
- Mini-buses are available for day and overnight field trips. Employees have to be certified by the school district transportation department before they can drive a school vehicle. The written, as well as the driving, tests are arranged during the first week of school or otherwise as needed by the office. At the beginning of each term, teachers meet to schedule vehicle use, so it is important to plan class related travel before the term begins. The vehicle use calendar is in the office. Keys for the vehicles are also in a drawer in the office. If you take a key, put your nametag in the empty slot.
- Always use a school vehicle to transport students. Do not transport students in your own vehicle. Do not allow students to drive their own vehicles.
- Each vehicle has a mileage and maintenance log, a first aid kit and other emergency equipment. Perform a vehicle safety check before leaving. Notify the office if something is wrong with the vehicle.

### Personnel Issues:

- **Work hours:** The work day for a full-time employee is from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. with a thirty minute lunch period. Some teachers teach after-school classes or sponsor activities, which are in session until later in the day. Promptness is a school norm and is expected of all staff.
  - Some duties/responsibilities may be required outside of work hours (ex. grading, grant work/documentation, facility upkeep, events)
- **Staff Dress Code:** All staff members project an image to the community and to students about the professionalism of the school. During the workday and at all work-related activities, employees shall adhere to a professional standard of dress and shall be neat and clean in appearance. Clothing that advertises, promotes, or is affiliated with illegal/controlled substances, politics, or controversial topics should be avoided. The Director has the final authority to decide what is considered professional attire.
- **Care and Use of Classrooms/Buildings:** Classrooms and offices should be maintained in a clean, organized, and orderly manner to facilitate a positive learning environment. The classroom environment is a space that facilitates the success of all students, including students with anxiety and other learning needs.
- **Leave and substitutes:**
  - Full-time employees accumulate discretionary-leave days each year. Unused discretionary leave accumulates through the years to a total of 70 days. Two emergency days are allowed per year, which need to be used during the school year as they are paid-out at the end of each year. Fill out the Staff Leave Request [form](#) each time you are absent or plan to be absent.
  - Notify the director, director of student services, and business manager as early as possible if you are ill and won't be at school. Provide lesson plans for a substitute teacher. The business manager will assist you in finding a substitute.

- Substitute plans must include a short description of student dispositions, behavioral challenges, information regarding student leaders and saboteurs and suggestions for handling unique student situations.
- **Pay:**
  - Full-time employees receive a paycheck on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the month. If the 25<sup>th</sup> falls on a weekend or holiday, the paycheck arrives on the last working day prior to the 25<sup>th</sup>. You can arrange for direct deposit or you can receive a check. Ask in the office if you have any questions or problems.
  - Part-time employees turn in timesheets showing their work hours by the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month. In months with holidays, the timesheet deadline might move to an earlier date. Announcements about this are posted on the office whiteboard.

#### **General Assistance:**

- Everyone will be happy to help you! We know that SWOS is different. We want you to be comfortable and knowledgeable. Other teachers in your content areas will support you. The people in the office are happy to answer questions. The administration will provide you with as much support as you need. Please don't hesitate to ask and we will try to check in with you.

#### **Staff Ethics/Conflict of Interest:**

- No SWOS employee shall engage in or have a financial interest, directly or indirectly, in any activity that conflicts or raises a reasonable question of conflict with his or her duties and responsibilities in the school system. Employees are expected to perform the duties of the position to which they are assigned and to observe rules of conduct and ethical principles established by state law and district policies and regulations.
- It shall be understood that all confidential information an employee is privy to as a result of SWOS employment shall be kept strictly confidential. In addition, employees shall not utilize information solely available to them through school sources to engage in any type of work outside of the school district. This includes information concerning potential customers, clients or employers.
- An employee shall not sell any books, instructional supplies, musical instruments, equipment or other school supplies to any student or to the parents/guardian of a student who attends the school served by the employee unless prior approval has been obtained from the board.
- Moreover, to avoid a conflict of interest, SWOS prohibits an employee from exercising supervisory, appointment, dismissal authority, or disciplinary action over a member of the employee's immediate family. For purposes of this policy, an employee's "immediate family" includes a spouse, children and parents. In addition, an employee may not audit, verify, receive or be entrusted with money received or handled by a member of the employee's immediate family. An employee shall not have access to the employer's confidential information concerning a member of the employee's immediate family, including payroll and personnel records.

- **Conflicts of interest - federally funded transactions**

- Separate from state law and the Board's policies concerning SWOS employees' standards of conduct and conflict of interest, federal law imposes restrictions on the conduct of district employees whenever the transaction in question is supported by federal funds subject to the Uniform Grant Guidance (UGG). Under the UGG, a SWOS employee shall not participate in the selection, award or administration of a contract supported by a federal award if the employee **has a** conflict of interest as defined by the UGG. A conflict of interest arises under the UGG when the employee, any member of his or her immediate family, his or her business partner, or an organization which employs or is about to employ any of the aforementioned parties has a substantial financial or other interest in or would obtain a substantial tangible personal benefit from a firm considered for a contract. In addition, the UGG prohibits SWOS employees from soliciting or accepting gratuities, favors, or anything of monetary value from contractors or parties to subcontracts that are federally funded, unless the gift is an unsolicited item of nominal value. For purposes of this policy section only, "immediate family" means the employee's spouse, partner in a civil union, children and parents. In determining whether a financial or other interest is "substantial," or whether anything solicited or accepted for private benefit is of "nominal value," SWOS employees shall follow the standards of conduct and corresponding definitions applicable to local government employees under state law.

### **Staff Conduct and Responsibilities:**

All staff members have a responsibility to make themselves familiar with and abide by federal and state laws as these affect their work, and the policies and regulations of the district. As representatives of the school and role models for students, all staff shall demonstrate and uphold high professional, ethical, and moral standards. Staff members shall conduct themselves in a manner that is consistent with the educational mission of the school and shall maintain professional boundaries with students at all times. Interactions between staff members must be based on mutual respect and disputes will be resolved in a professional manner. Essential to the success of ongoing school operations and the instructional program are the following specific responsibilities which shall be required of all personnel:

- Faithfulness and promptness in attendance at work.
- Support and enforcement of policies of the Board and the regulations of the school administration in regard to students.
- Diligence in submitting reports promptly at the times specified.
- Care and protection of school property.
- Concern and attention toward the safety and welfare of students, including the need to ensure that students are appropriately supervised. Care and Use of Classrooms/Buildings Classrooms and offices should be maintained in a clean, organized, and orderly manner to facilitate a positive learning environment. The classroom environment is a space that facilitates the success

- of all students, including students with anxiety and other learning needs.
- Completion of all mandatory training assigned at the beginning of the school year, during the work time provided at the beginning of the school year.

**Unit/Project Planning:**

To be a successful teacher requires effective planning. Written lesson plans should include objectives that align to Colorado State standards, specific learning goals and outcomes, various assessment measures, and differentiation to teach to varying ability levels of all students. Written lesson plans are required for each academic term. Teachers will have an individual planning period.

**Controversial Issues/Outside Resources:**

- Staff members are responsible for their own professional acts. If in doubt about the handling of specific issues, staff members should confer with the Director. Controversial issues are defined as those problems, subjects or questions about which there are significant differences of opinion and discussion of which generally creates strong feelings among people. Although there may be disagreement over what the facts are and what they mean, subjects usually become controversial issues because of differences in interpretation or the values people use in applying the facts. Staff members should be aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors on others. Staff members will respect the diversity of peers, students, families, and stakeholders and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto others, especially when the staff member's values are inconsistent with school policy, mission, strategic goals or are discriminatory in nature.
- Controversial materials are defined as learning resources which are not part of the school's approved learning resources and which are subject to disagreement as to appropriateness because they refer or relate to a controversial issue or present material in a manner which is itself controversial. Examples of such materials include, but are not limited to, those that depict explicit sexual conduct, graphic violence, profanity, drug use or other socially undesirable behaviors, or materials that are likely to divide the community along racial, ethnic or religious lines. Films, programs and/or videos rated R and TV-MA shall be considered controversial in accordance with this policy. X-rated and NC-17-rated films and videos shall not be used in SWOS classrooms. Teachers may use controversial learning materials and discuss controversial issues if they contribute to the attainment of course objectives directly related to Colorado State standards and further critical thinking and analysis. The educational purpose of teaching about controversial issues or using controversial materials must be student achievement in academic standards rather than reaching conclusions about the validity of a specific point of view. In teaching about controversial issues, teachers shall work cooperatively with the Director. Teachers shall obtain approval from the Director prior to the use of any controversial materials. If a teacher has a question regarding whether an issue or resource is controversial within the meaning of this policy, the teacher shall contact the Director. The Director may instruct the

teacher to notify students and their parents/guardians and obtain parents/guardians' permission prior to discussing a controversial issue or using controversial materials. Teachers shall inform the Director of controversial issues that arise unexpectedly which cause or are likely to cause concern for students and/or their parents/guardians. When teaching about controversial issues, teachers may express their personal viewpoints and opinions; however, they also have the obligation to be objective and to impartially present the various sides of an issue. Controversial issues are to be presented with good judgment and in coordination with the Director, keeping in mind the maturity of the students. When controversial issues or controversial materials are used as part of the instructional program, alternate learning activities shall be provided when feasible at the request of a student or the student's parent/guardian.

**Guest Speakers:**

Whenever a professional staff member wishes to arrange for a resource person to address or in any way participate in their class program, the professional staff member shall confer with and obtain written approval from the Director in advance. Information provided to the Director shall include the name of the visitor and the date of the proposed visit, as well as the topic that will be discussed with students. During the presentation by the individual, the professional staff member shall remain present at all times. If controversial topics will be discussed by the resource person, the staff member shall consult with the Director before granting approval. Those wishing to have an outside speaker as a guest speaker must seek prior approval from the Director at least 72 hours (three school days) in advance of the desired date for the guest speaker's presentation.

**Use of Videos/Film:**

The teacher shall preview all film resources prior to using them in the classroom. The section of this handbook titled Controversial Issues/Outside Resources further addresses the use of films, and provides further details regarding film use and ratings. The Director may instruct teachers to notify parents prior to showing a film or a portion of a film. If a notification is required, the notification shall include a permission form which the parent/guardian must sign and return to the teacher before the student will be allowed to view the film. Teachers shall provide alternative educational activities for all students who do not view the film.