On November 2, 2017, fifty students from Mount Elden Middle School Alpine Academy traveled to the Deer Hill Trail to help with the ongoing reroute and improvements on that trail.

Deer Hill Trail, which runs low on the eastern side of the San Francisco Peaks was a trail with questionable sustainability in the first place. Though it’s low angle locations means no huge hills to contend with, the trail was built across multiple drainages using a fall line strategy across the entire length. In the aftermath of the Schultz Fire and subsequent flooding in 2010, this trail has become severely washed out and eroded.

Rather than attempt to repair a trail with suboptimal alignment, the Forest Service is rerouting it. This will not only retain access to this part of the forest via singletrack, but will give the new trail the best possible chance of remaining in good shape for as long as possible. This gave our students the unique opportunity to scratch in brand new trail on a shiny new alignment. They were able to study and compare the old trail, complete with steep angles, large rolling rocks and rutted tread, to the new smoother and more contoured alignment. They removed grasses and pine needles from the new tread and tamped the fresh new dirt to make it ready for traffic. Once they had completed their section, they set about convincingly closing the old alignment to allow the area to revegetate and be restored.

With such a large group it becomes necessary to divide into groups to make the management of trail work and tool use easier. Half the students headed out before lunch to tackle the trail while the other half joined me for a trail design and planning lesson. Students had the chance to write proposals for their own new trail and lay out a model using yarn. After working hard on tread repair and grass removal, we all met back up for lunch, and chats with our Forest Service partners with delicious cookies. Once lunch was over we all swapped groups to give everyone a chance to participate in trail building and learning.

The biggest goal for this group is exposing the students to as many different kinds of service learning as possible. In the first semester of school the teachers direct the projects and give the
students some ideas of community problems they can solve. By next semester, the students will design their own service projects in small groups to execute. I can’t wait to see if some of them choose a trail project to leave their legacy.

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