

# Sharing the Story of Impact: Philadelphia Innovative High Schools

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## *Building 21 Case Study*

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Spring 2018



THE BARRA FOUNDATION

***The Barra Foundation’s mission is to invest in innovation to inspire change that strengthens communities in the Greater Philadelphia region.***

Through the Catalyst Fund, The Barra Foundation (Foundation) invests in ideas that tackle problems or seize opportunities in new, different, better and significant ways. These timely and novel approaches push boundaries and have the potential to inspire change. We recognize the need to provide financial support for risk-taking, challenges to old assumptions, and new models for accomplishing important work in the social sector. We also value learning as an important part of the innovation process.

In reviewing its portfolio of grants, the Foundation began to recognize that over the years it had funded several schools that were now part of the Innovation Network of The School District of Philadelphia (District). The Foundation invested in each of these schools—Science Leadership Academy, the Workshop School, Building 21 and Vaux Big Picture High School—early in their development because we believed that their creative new approaches had the potential to not only change the lives of students, but also help inform and advance the field of education.

Given our desire to share learning as part of the innovation process, the Foundation decided to embark on its first “thematic review” to look back across these four grants to capture learnings from these highly innovative schools in the District that have been supported by the Foundation.

Over the last year, ImpactED, in partnership with the Foundation, has engaged in an intensive year of learning about these models. We wanted to learn from this work and explore the

necessary conditions (at the school and system level) for fostering school innovation. We hope that by sharing these findings others will be inspired to think differently. To help readers consider how these models might be adopted and adapted, ImpactED has included a Recommendations section at the end of the report.

We thank the school leaders and their staff for their thoughtfulness and willingness to share openly during this process and for the important work they do every day to awaken students' potential through new approaches. The District was a valued partner in this exploration as well. We also extend our thanks to our partner ImpactED for their enthusiasm for taking on this opportunity to explore what makes these models work—and what holds them back.

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*To view the reports and accompanying videos for all of the schools,  
please visit:*

[www.barrafoundation.org/phila-innov-hs/](http://www.barrafoundation.org/phila-innov-hs/)

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THE BARRA FOUNDATION

# OVERVIEW

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## Background

In the Fall of 2014, **Building 21 (B21)** opened its doors in the West Kensington neighborhood of Northeast Philadelphia. Co-founders Chip Linehan and Laura Shubilla designed B21's innovative approach while enrolled in Harvard's Doctorate of Educational Leadership program and named the school after the famous Building 20 at M.I.T., which has served as a cradle of innovation and divergent thinking for over 50 years. At the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, B21 moved to a new community about five miles north of the original school's location.

The school's goal has remained the same since day one: to develop a new secondary school design that adapts to meet learners where they are, and then helps them to pursue their interests and passion on a pathway to college and career success. Pursuing this goal entailed working with the School District of Philadelphia's (District) Office of New School Models to develop a competency-based approach to student learning and building a new student information system to track progress within this model.

B21 is a competency-based and project-based model. Competencies define the explicit, measurable, and transferable learning objectives that students are expected to achieve during their time at B21. These competencies include the application and creation of knowledge, as well as the development of important skills that are necessary for post-secondary success. Student learning is approached through inquiry, where teachers identify a problem that students can address and demonstrate mastery of competencies through meaningful projects. Through the use of advisories and restorative practices, B21 has developed a culture rooted in trusting relationships between students and staff.

From the school's inception, the founders believed that the school's design efforts would be a work in progress, and, in practice, the design remains ahead of the implementation at B21. Each year, the school has iterated on its approach to better meet the needs of students. Leaders have focused on building stronger culture and determining how best to scaffold the instructional model based on students' learning needs. Currently, B21 has prioritized clarifying the core elements of the B21 model and increasing supports for teachers to more effectively implement project-based learning across the school. While practice still lags behind theory, B21 has the advantage of visionary leaders, external support, and a robust student-centric information system to support its efforts to implement its innovative school model.

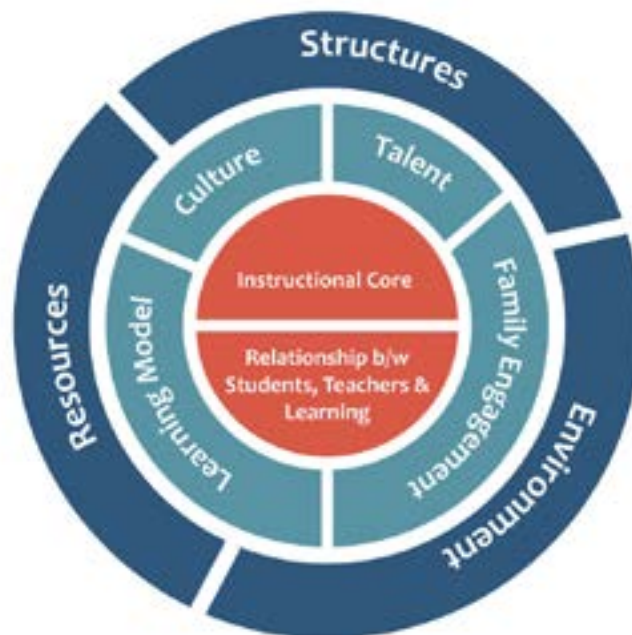
Demographics			
73% Black/African American	3% Multi-Racial / Other	1% Asian	6% English Language Learners
1% White (Non-Hispanic)	22% Hispanic/Latino	100% Economically Disadvantaged	16% Special Education (IEP)

## Methodology

The Barra Foundation contracted with ImpactED to learn more about the Building 21 model and how it has evolved over B21's first four years in operation. Between December 2017 and March 2018, members of our team immersed themselves in the school and collected data through the following sources:

- ✔ **Meetings with Key Stakeholders:** Formal and informal meetings with a variety of stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, parents, and community members/partners
- ✔ **Observations:** Observations of classrooms and teacher professional development
- ✔ **School and Community Events:** Attendance at school and community events, including internal events like presentations of student work and external events like school advisory council meetings

After several months of data collection, we systematically analyzed our results, identifying trends and variation. We shared our results with school leadership to ensure our findings accurately captured their experience. Our results are reported to align with the following framework:



**Instructional Core.** This section describes how the school builds relationships between students, teachers, and instructional content and how student success is defined/measured.



**School-Level Features.** This section describes how the school design supports the instructional core and discusses strengths and challenges associated with implementation.

- ▶ **Learning Model**  
Approach to curriculum/instruction
- ▶ **Culture**  
Elements and strategies for building culture among students and teachers

- ▶ **Talent**  
Processes for recruiting and supporting teachers
- ▶ **Family & Community Engagement**  
Strategies for engaging families & community



**Conditions.** This section explores the conditions that support/inhibit the school model.

- ▶ **Structures**  
Formal and informal structures that support or inhibit the learning model
- ▶ **Resources**  
Financial, human, and community resources that support or inhibit the learning model
- ▶ **Environment**  
External factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations, and performance



*all photography by Andrew Gormley - [andrewgormley.com](http://andrewgormley.com)*



# SUMMARY

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B21 focuses on creating the conditions where every student can succeed and where learning is connected to each student's passion. Strong relationships between students and teachers are at the core of the approach and are fostered through daily advisories. With the deep belief that students learn better when content is relevant to their lives, the model includes personalized learning pathways, problem-based learning, and a variety of opportunities for real-world application both in and out of the school building. To ensure students are equipped to succeed after high school, students are assessed not only on their progress on academic competencies, but also on other non-academic habits and skills deemed necessary for post-secondary success.



## Instructional Core

- ▶ B21 takes a holistic approach to learning, emphasizing academic competencies as well as other non-academic skills deemed necessary for post-secondary success.
- ▶ Since students come in at varying levels, competencies are assessed on both mastery and growth.
- ▶ Competencies are shifting to better reflect what's required for success in a post-secondary environment.



## School Features

- ▶ The Learning What Matters framework provides students with an opportunity to exercise their passion and agency; however, it has been challenging for teachers to implement consistently given the intensive demands on time and shift in pedagogical approach.
- ▶ Relationships have been a major focus in the early years of B21, and are cultivated through daily advisories.
- ▶ Teachers have autonomy to iterate on their instructional approach as they see fit; while empowering, this can also be overwhelming, particularly for newer teachers.
- ▶ Despite the existence of multiple structures, engaging families outside of a compliance role remains a challenge at B21.



## Conditions

- ▶ B21's nonprofit is able to secure additional financial and technological resources to provide students with unique educational opportunities.
- ▶ B21 has had challenges aligning its competency based model with the District's graduation requirements, course structure, and system requirements (e.g., Student Information System).
- ▶ B21's leadership has cultivated an environment where staff feels safe to iterate on their approach.





# INSTRUCTIONAL CORE

The mission of B21 is to empower networks of learners to connect with their passions and build agency to impact their world. To do this, B21 employs a holistic competency based approach to learning, which includes academic competencies, habits of success and other essential skills students need to navigate the post-secondary world. Taken together, these competencies are designed to ensure students feel valued and expose them to meaningful learning experiences.

- ✔ **B21 takes a holistic approach to learning, emphasizing academic competencies, as well as other non-academic skills deemed necessary for post-secondary success.**

B21 defines competencies as the essential skills required for postsecondary readiness. Each competency is intended to connect to a meaningful outcome that empowers learners. Academic competencies include skills progression in core subjects, such as English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. To eliminate barriers, competencies associated with habits of success - including growth mindset, agency, and collaboration with others - are regarded as just as important as academic competencies. Habits of success are assessed similarly to academic competencies where each habit has a corresponding skills' progression that captures student growth over time.

The difference at B21, what makes it unique, is the focus on competencies. We want kids to master important skills that will prepare them for college and the workforce that are transferable skills. Common feedback I get from students is they want to know why they are doing what they are doing and how this is applicable to their life.

- B21 Teacher

- ✔ **Since students come in at varying levels, competencies are assessed on both mastery and growth.**

Each competency is tied to a continuum of skills (from Level 6 to Level 12), which students develop over their time at B21. Unlike more traditional school models, the expectation is not that every student in a particular grade will be able to perform at that grade level. Instead, teachers emphasize student progression through the skills continuum over time and work to provide each student with support that meets their needs. While this individualized approach is time intensive, it is reflective of a strong belief that student learning should be personalized.

- ✔ **Competencies are shifting to better reflect what's required for success in a post-secondary environment.**

B21 consistently strives to equip students with the skills they need for success after high school. For its first several years, B21 focused on building essential work habits and professional skills. Currently, B21 is working to incorporate a new set of skills, drawn from the NGLC My Ways Framework. These new competencies focus on “next gen essentials” and “way-finding” skills, which help students develop strategies to navigate real-world opportunities and monitor their own progress. For example, this could involve students taking more ownership over checking in on their progress on competencies during their time at B21.





# SCHOOL-LEVEL FEATURES

## Learning Model

From its inception, B21 has utilized Learning What Matters (LWM), a competency-based framework that emphasizes personalized learning pathways and authentic and relevant projects and performance tasks. Over the first few years, staff had challenges implementing B21's learning model with fidelity given its complexity and the intensive needs of the student population. As a result, each year leadership has iterated on the learning model, recognizing that the approach needs to be appropriately scaffolded to effectively meet students' needs.

- ✔ **The LWM framework provides students with an opportunity to exercise their passion and agency; however, it has been challenging for teachers to implement consistently given the intensive demands on time and shift in pedagogical approach.**

Rather than teach traditional subjects on a semester basis, in the LWM framework, teachers develop eight week long studios, designed around one central problem or issue. For each studio, they create a studio map which aligns to key academic competencies and habits of success and asks students to address a real-world problem. Teachers are expected to score performance tasks and provide students with feedback based on where the student scores on the skills' continuum. However, given students' varied starting points, it can be challenging - and time consuming - for staff to ensure that all students are exposed to rigorous content tailored to meet their unique needs. This expectation is particularly challenging for new staff who report difficulties trying to learn the many complexities associated with implementing the B21 model in their first year.

Everything we have to do we go kid by kid. Kids know that. Kids know that for some students things look different. That is the beauty of it. They respect it. We don't have a culture of 'why did they get to work on that but I didn't.' Kids who want to reach the highest bar are pushed to do that. Kids who need additional support don't feel like there's something wrong with them. It is all about meeting each kid where they are.

- B21 Principal

- ✔ **Students are provided with many real-world experiences, and staff is working to better systematize and structure these opportunities.**

In 9th and 10th grade, students explore different pre-professional "Personalized Learning Pathways." In 9th grade, students take a "Foundations" course which introduces each Pathway. In 10th grade, students take part in a "Challenge Week" where they work in groups with external partners on a specific challenge, culminating in the presentation of student work at the client site. In 11th and 12th

grade students participate in a class related to their Pathway, called Pathway Studios, and may have an opportunity to participate in an internship or other off-site experience. For example, one of the founders connected a student with an internship at a barber shop and another student interns at a law firm where a family member of a school employee works. Currently, the internship opportunities are provided on more of an ad hoc basis resulting from these types of connections. As one senior expressed, “as the student you have to put the effort in” and advocate for your interests. As a result, some students reported not necessarily being placed in a pathway that matches their interests. B21 is currently working to better structure these opportunities to enhance student matches by creating systems that govern the personalized learning pathway.

✔ **Exhibitions exemplify B21’s focus on providing students with meaningful learning experiences and an opportunity to exercise their voice and choice.**

Following each learning cycle, every student presents on a subject of their choosing to the wider school community during exhibitions. Students are also empowered to choose the medium for their presentation (e.g., traditional tri-fold boards, music videos, original song, and art). After presentations, staff, students, and community members in attendance share feedback that encourages students to reflect on their experience. While not all students like the pressure of public presentation, they shared that it challenges them to develop skills that will be valuable in the real world.

✔ **B21 has learned the value of scaffolding implementation of the learning model and continues to iterate on its approach to meet the needs of staff and students and comply with district requirements.**

In the first year, the majority of students/teachers at B21 had limited knowledge of what it meant to learn/teach in a competency- and project-based model. Since the majority of students were significantly below grade level, teachers wrestled with how to balance the desire to provide students with autonomy with the need to provide them with basic skill development. In the first few years, leadership shared that B21 focused on building the culture and is now turning to clarifying the instructional approach and providing supports for addressing students’ differentiated needs. Given challenges aligning the competency based approach with district expectations, B21 switched to a course based model with competencies embedded within these courses, and is also planning on providing more concrete student skill development through targeted skill-building workshops. As a result of these efforts, students reported that “it’s easier to know how you are doing” and “the systems are more efficient now.”

Traditional schools tend to have a ‘this is the way we do it, have always done it, until told we have to do it some other way’ mentality, but here there has been frequent changes in terms of raising the academic bar, raising engagement, discipline. Things change year to year. I appreciate that it feels like a start up. We are not stuck; we recognize that we have not arrived yet but we are working on getting there.

- B21 Teacher

## Culture

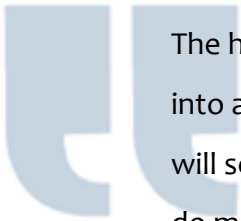
Strong relationships between teachers and students are at the heart of B21. These relationships are facilitated by advisories (a class of 10-15 students which meets daily), a commitment to a restorative practices approach to discipline, and an expectation that that all adults and students in the building should constantly be working to maintain healthy relationships

### ✔ Relationships have been a major focus in the early years of B21, and are cultivated through daily advisories.

To facilitate relationship-building, each student at B21 is assigned to an advisory that meets for 30 minutes daily (and 90 minutes on Friday) and stays together for all four years. These advisories ensure that each student has a caring adult in their lives, and students and staff alike refer to these advisories as “their families” at the school. Advisors also serve as the conduit between home and school and are expected to regularly check in with parents on their students’ progress. Leadership notes that they’ve worked to ensure consistency in culture across advisories, but have intentionally chosen not to impose too much structure. As a result, advisors have the autonomy to choose strategies for culture building, whether that’s circle time, one-on-one check ins or playing games.

### ✔ The B21 community uses restorative justice practices, like Teen Court, to foster student ownership over their behavior and the school’s culture.

B21 is committed to providing students with ownership over their learning, as well as the school’s culture. For example, in Teen Court, a class in which upperclassmen exercise peer accountability, students consider cases of other students who have received infractions. Consequences are issued that provide the student on trial with steps to repair any relationships (e.g., between student and teacher or students and their peers) damaged due to their actions. While additional repercussions (e.g., a student behavior chart), are often passed down in Teen Court as an outcome of the trial, the mending of relationships is of paramount importance.



The heart of our culture is relationships. If you walk into our school and go into advisory to observe interactions between students and teachers, you will see relationships. It drives the culture and the work we do. Here we do mediations. Here we do restorative practices. All of the systems we have in place aim at restoring relationships.

**-B21 Teacher**



✔ **B21 is committed to providing students with voice and choice; however, it is challenging for staff to balance student autonomy with the need for structure.**

In addition to culture building, advisors are also expected to hold high expectations for their advisees, keeping close watch on their academic journey. For example, teachers may stay after class to tutor students or provide them with an opportunity for credit recovery. As teachers fill in their studio maps for the upcoming learning cycle, they are also prompted to answer how the work being asked of students will provide them with voice and choice. While staff deeply believe in the importance of student ownership, they also report that some students need more structured expectations to realize their potential. The way teachers approach navigating this balance between providing students with autonomy and structure varies across the school.

In terms of what advisories look like in the classroom, it is at the discretion of the advisor. This means that it looks very different from classroom to classroom.

I have grappled with that because on one hand we want more structure, but at the same time if there is too much structure in advisories the relationship between teachers and students will not be organic, will not be authentic.

- B21 Principal

## Talent

Teaching at B21 requires a different skill set than teaching at a traditional high school. Teachers are given autonomy over their instruction, which they appreciate, but are expected to build authentic relationships and personalize learning to meet students' individual needs, which they report can be challenging to implement with fidelity. Leadership supports staff through bi-weekly professional development sessions, instructional coaching, and time for teacher-led collaboration.

- ✔ **Teachers have autonomy to iterate on their instructional approach as they see fit; while empowering, this can also be overwhelming, particularly for newer teachers.**

While all teachers use the competency based model, teachers have autonomy over how to structure learning experiences to best meet students' needs. School leadership wants teachers to feel safe trying new things and learning from failure and subsequent reflection. Teachers report that this type of autonomy is empowering and makes them feel valued as professionals in a way that is quite different from other schools. One teacher, comparing B21 to her former school, shared "I can finally breathe here." While they appreciate this autonomy, many teachers come to B21 having taught in traditional teaching models for numerous years, making this level of autonomy overwhelming at times. These teachers report needing more structured support to effectively transition to B21's learning model. Leadership hopes to find a middle ground for teacher autonomy, where teachers are trusted as professionals but provided with concrete expectations, exemplars, starter studios, and support to successfully make use of that autonomy.

B21 says to its teachers we want you to make this role what is best for our community.

I have appreciated and been humbled by the autonomy and because I know I have the trust of the administration. I can make decisions I cannot make at other schools because of the way decisions are made at other schools. I appreciate so much the autonomy we have in decision making.

- B21 Teacher

- ✔ **B21 has a robust hiring process but has had challenges finding candidates with the right skill sets - e.g., comfort working with ambiguity, growth mindset, and resilience - to be successful in the B21 model.**

To identify teachers within the district hiring process, B21 leadership asks targeted questions that reflect the skills - positive mindset about students, growth mindset, comfort with working with ambiguity, strong relationships building skills and resilience - necessary for success in the B21 model. Beginning last year, prospective teachers were also required to perform a demo lesson. As part of this lesson, the applicant prepared a studio map, collaborated with other teachers, and presented to the group. Given the importance placed on relationship building, applicants also facilitated a circle with students, and leadership asked for students' input on the quality of connections, which was used to inform the final decision. Despite a thorough hiring process, some new B21 teachers have been overwhelmed by the complexities of the new model which has led to teacher turnover. Teacher support - and retention - are a high priority for B21 leadership moving forward.



## Family & Community Engagement

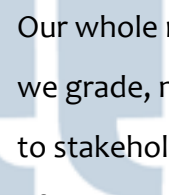
B21 engages families through a School Advisory Council (SAC), parent teacher conferences, and through EH-42 meetings. Every school serving grades 7-12 within the District is required to operate a SAC, which is a group comprised of parents, the school principal, and other school staff. EH-42 meetings are mandatory parents meetings, utilized when the school deems parent involvement necessary to discuss a student issue. Community engagement is a robust part of B21, and partnerships allow students to apply their learning in a real-world context.

### ✔ Despite the existence of multiple structures, engaging families outside of a compliance role remains a challenge at B21.

Family engagement is a self-described “growth area” for B21 as reflected in lower than desired parent turn out for SAC meetings and parent teacher conferences. Family engagement primarily exists at the compliance level, when parents are required to come to school for student behavioral issues, addressed in EH-42 meetings. While EH-42 meetings are an opportunity for teachers and parents to present a united front, leaders at B21 identify the importance of creating more meaningful opportunities for parents to partner with teachers in their child’s education.

### ✔ B21 continues to work on how to best communicate the learning model to students’ families.

Students and families are unfamiliar with B21’s competency-based model, which presents a barrier to communicating with parents who are accustomed to the grade-based assessments of their students’ middle and elementary schools. Leaders at B21 note the importance of creating transparency to invest families in the process; however, this is complicated by the shifting focus from year to year. To address challenges, leadership is taking steps to create a parent-friendly competency dashboard and build stronger relationships between advisors and students’ families.



Our whole model, how we grade, what we grade, needs to be transparent to stakeholders and fit the needs of students we’re serving. It’s difficult to be transparent when things are constantly changing.

- B21 Teacher

### ✔ Community partners engage with B21 in a variety of ways and are seen as a key vehicle for connecting student’s classroom experience to the real world.

Fostered through the work of the Partnership Manager, B21 has robust community partnerships that enhance student learning in and out of the classroom. Community partner roles can be intensive (e.g., partnering with a teacher to co-develop a class, providing internships and job-shadowing opportunities) or more limited (e.g., a one time guest speaking appearance). Leadership is working to deepen the commitment of community partners by moving them from more limited - to ongoing - engagement. The majority of these partners have been identified through existing staff relationships and cold calling, so leadership is also working to create more structured guidelines for selecting and overseeing partnerships.



## CONDITIONS

- ✔ **B21's nonprofit is able to secure additional financial and technological resources to provide students with unique educational opportunities.**

Since its opening, B21's promise of a new educational model has been supported by both local and national funders. The nonprofit raises additional funds, which are used to support unique aspects of the learning model, such as the Partnerships Manager position, the creation of an entirely new competency based tracking system, and a laptop for every student. Staff use these technological resources to facilitate personalized learning experiences. For example, teachers take advantage of each student's access to a laptop by using Google Classroom and technology to differentiate learning experiences. B21 has also partnered with Slate to create dashboards that provide individual student data on key competencies along with aggregate class data.

- ✔ **B21 has had challenges aligning its competency based model with The School District of Philadelphia's (SDP) graduation requirements, course structure and system requirements (e.g., Student Information System).**

Since students are assessed on their skill level aligned to various competencies, rather than grades, it has been challenging to align what students are learning with the District's requirements. As a District school, B21 is required to turn in grades for each student. To comply with the District's requirements, B21 staff has created conversion charts for their competency continuums and spends considerable time reconciling the model with district expectations. This process is made more complex due to the fact that different competencies have different continuums and because students at B21 are assessed on both performance and growth.

- ✔ **B21's leadership has cultivated an environment where staff feels safe to iterate on their approach.**

B21's leadership is clearly committed to the model and has a strong growth mindset about what is possible for both students and adults. They are constantly striving to improve and also empower teachers to take risks in their practice. To support this iterative process, students are released early every Friday to allow for teacher professional development and planning time, and teachers are also encouraged to collaborate informally. To be successful at a school like B21, teachers must view failure as a necessary step in the learning process and be resilient in the face of challenge.

### Leadership's Quotes on Failure

*"Teachers have to be willing to fail and grow and try new things because we have not figured out the best way. But we know the right thing for kids is not working in a traditional system."*

*"We are going to fail, and we need to be ok with that. Have to fail to succeed. Need to push teachers to go out and take challenges."*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## For Building 21

### ✔ Clarify, and create buy in for, a shared academic model across staff.

B21 is currently in the process of making their academic model more accessible by paring it down and streamlining key elements. In this new “3.0” model, B21 leadership should define academic and cultural non-negotiables and build investment around a core set of practices. To ensure staff are supported to implement these practices with fidelity, B21 should intentionally align systems and structures with key elements.

### ✔ Scaffold support for new teachers implementing the LWM model.

In addition to the challenges of starting at a new school, new teachers at B21 must also learn the new LWM Framework. Improving support for new teachers implementing competency based learning for the first time is critical. This additional support could include an extended orientation period prior to the start of school, a mentorship program between veteran and new teachers, and/or exemplar studio maps or videos.

### ✔ Balance the need for relationships with clear structure.

Teachers at B21 prioritize creating strong relationships with students and value the human element of teaching and learning. However, they sometimes struggle to find the right balance between managing these relationships and holding students accountable for taking ownership over their learning. While the protection of relationships is paramount, B21 should consider how to best prepare staff to be successful in both building authentic relationships and holding students to high expectations.



## For Other Schools

### ✔ Implement advisories for all students within a school.

At B21, advisories, which meet 30 minutes every morning and 90 minutes on Friday, have enabled a strong culture grounded in trusting relationships between teachers and students. Schools across the district should consider implementing advisories, beyond the obligatory homeroom, for their students to benefit from similar outcomes.

### ✔ Scaffold roll out of a new learning model.

In B21's first year, an entirely new educational model was implemented, which was quite different from staff and student experiences to date. Given the complexities inherent in the model, as well as students' significant learning needs, staff had challenges implementing the model consistently and scaffolding the approach. Other schools considering implementing a new educational approach should consider how best to roll out the model in a way that deepens teachers' and students' understanding of the approach over time.

### ✔ Cultivate community partnerships that help connect school content to real world experiences.

At B21 students engage in meaningful real-world learning experiences that makes their learning relevant to their lives. Schools should identify community partners to provide a range of opportunities, including guest speakers, and internships. This will require technical considerations such as scheduling, transportation, and training for things like internships, field trips, and college courses. Schools should also consider the implications this has for teacher onboarding and ongoing development.

## For Districts

### ✔ Help to identify and train teachers who will succeed in innovative schools.

It requires a particular mindset to be a successful teacher at innovative schools like B21. Districts should host special recruiting opportunities for candidates interested in working at innovative schools and provide flexibility in hiring and transfer requirements to ensure that teachers are a strong fit for innovative models.

### ✔ Work with schools to develop next-generation assessment systems.

Districts should lead the work of defining quality measures that align to innovative schools' varying approaches to learning, and, in particular, the emphasis on real-world skill development. These assessment systems can be used to not only determine summative achievement, but also to develop formative assessment strategies that empower teachers and students to make real-time adjustments in practice. Districts should utilize lessons learned from the NGLC's Assessment for Learning Project to inform this work.

✔ **Provide innovative schools with needed flexibility to implement their models with fidelity.**

While B21 has some autonomies, staff still spends considerable effort trying to align their competency approach with the District's course and graduation requirements. To ensure that needed autonomy is balanced with clear accountability, districts should involve innovation schools in the creation of metrics that would allow for effective monitoring, but also provide the necessary freedom to try new approaches.

## For Funders

✔ **Be prepared for iteration.**

New school models aren't always fully formed and typically evolve, not just when they are being designed and initially implemented, but over time. This iteration can be uncomfortable for many funders who want to understand their grantee's work. Funders should prepare for the reality that the work of innovative schools can look messy and keep an open - and ongoing - dialogue with their grantees. They should create a space where it's OK for grantees to share risks, failures and changes associated with implementing their model.

✔ **Give it time and look beyond common metrics of success.**

Because innovative schools are creating new models that take time to build, it also takes time to produce results on traditional metrics of success (e.g., test scores). Funders need to be patient and not expect to see these types of results in the early years of implementation. It's also critically important that funders support a broader definition of student success that captures soft skills (e.g., growth mindset, collaboration, resilience) and interim measures (e.g., student attendance). If these skills are cultivated and students feel safe, comfortable, and heard, there is a good chance higher scores will follow.

✔ **Remember that innovation requires R&D dollars and schools need funding beyond what is provided by their districts.**

Successfully implementing an innovative school model requires strategic and thoughtful design. However, some of the hardest funding to get is funding associated with designing and implementing new programs. While district funding meets the basic needs of schools, many schools have nonprofit affiliates that fundraise for R&D and additional programs or resources (e.g., one-to-one tech or non-required staff to implement trauma informed approaches or makerspaces). If funders want to support the type of work that challenges existing models, they should consider taking on some of the risk of investing in new work—particularly at the planning stage. They should also consider supporting districts in their efforts to create the conditions necessary for success (e.g., high quality instructional materials, coaching supports).



For more information on B21,  
please contact  
Laura Shubilla at [laura@b-21.org](mailto:laura@b-21.org).

Learn more about ImpactED's work at [www.impactdphl.com](http://www.impactdphl.com).