

# Sharing the Story of Impact: Philadelphia Innovative High Schools

## *Key Takeaways & Implications*

June 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/)

*To learn more about The Barra Foundation and our work supporting these schools and other  
innovative approaches in the areas of Arts & Culture, Education, Health and Human Services  
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THE BARRA FOUNDATION

# OVERVIEW

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## Background

The Barra Foundation's Catalyst Fund has supported four innovative high schools in Philadelphia - Vaux Big Picture High School (VBPHS or Vaux Big Picture), Building 21 (B21), the Workshop School (WS), and Science Leadership Academy (SLA). Over the last year, ImpactED, in partnership with the Barra Foundation, has engaged in an intensive year of learning about these school models. The schools are located in neighborhoods across the city.

- ✔ **Vaux Big Picture High School.** Located in the Sharswood neighborhood, Vaux Big Picture High School (VBPHS or Vaux) opened in September 2017 as part of a neighborhood revitalization project initiated by the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA). The result of a partnership between Big Picture Philadelphia (BPP or Big Picture), PHA, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP or District) and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), VBPHS aims to serve in a capacity similar to a community school, by providing the Big Picture model's proven educational approach as well as resources, such as health care and adult education services, for the Sharswood community. VBPHS opened with 126 ninth-grade students and plans to grow by one grade each year. The inaugural ninth grade class will graduate in 2021. Formerly known as Roberts Vaux Junior High School, VBPHS is only one part of PHA's multimillion-dollar redevelopment initiative in Sharswood.
- ✔ **Building 21.** 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.
- ✔ **Workshop School.** The Workshop School is a project-based open enrollment public high school in West Philadelphia, serving 100% economically disadvantaged students. It was founded in 2013 in response to two critical problems - (1) a mismatch between what's typically taught in school and the skills required in the real-world and (2) the reality that this mismatch is even more pronounced in disadvantaged communities, where schools often focus on remedial knowledge and skill development. According to Workshop School leadership, project-based learning is a way to not only build critical skills, but also to combat systemic discrimination and disadvantage.
- ✔ **Science Leadership Academy.** Science Leadership Academy (SLA) opened its doors on September 7, 2006, as the first partnership high school between The School District of Philadelphia and The Franklin Institute. Eleven years later, SLA is still an inquiry-driven, project-based magnet high school focused on 21st century modern learning. SLA serves about 500 students from across the city. Over the last few years, SLA has opened two additional campuses in Philadelphia. The first, Science Leadership Academy at Beeber opened its doors on September 9, 2013, as a high school and will welcome the first class of 5th graders in September 2018. The second, SLA Middle School (or SLAMS) opened in 2016.

The schools serve diverse populations of students, many of whom are starting high school significantly below grade level and facing significant challenges both inside - and outside - of school.

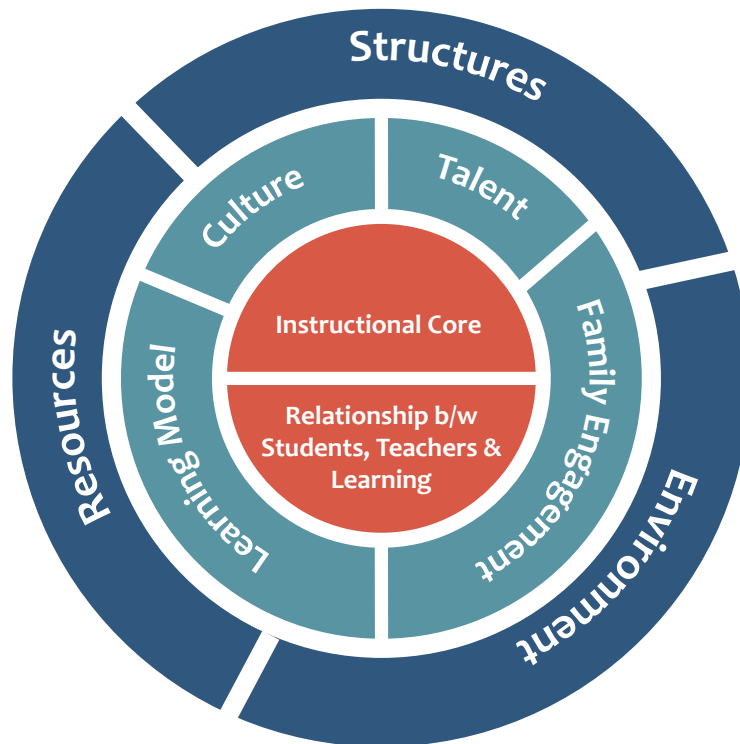
Demographics					
	Vaux Big Picture High School	Building 21	Workshop School	Science Leadership Academy	
African American	94%	73%	87%	35%	
White (Non Hispanic)	2%	1%	1%	34%	
Multi-Racial / Other	2%	3%	6%	9%	
Hispanic / Latino	2%	22%	3%	11%	
Asian	0%	1%	3%	11%	
Economically Disadvantaged	68%	100%	100%	50%	
English Language Learners	0%	6%	3%	3%	
Special Education (IEP)	23%	16%	21%	12%	


## Methodology


The Barra Foundation contracted with ImpactED to learn more about how the Science Leadership Academy model has been sustained over time. 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.** How schools build relationships among students, teachers, and instructional content and how student success is defined/measured.

 **School-Level Features.** How school-level features support the instructional core.

- ▶ **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.** How certain conditions support/inhibit the school model.

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



Building 21

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



The Workshop School

## Report Overview

This summary report includes a summary of the case study for each school, key takeaways across schools, and implications for the School District of Philadelphia (District) and other schools interested in implementing similar models.

- ✔ **Section 1: Summaries of Case Studies.** The summary of each case study presents the vision and key attributes of the school model aligned to the sections of the framework described above.
- ✔ **Section 2: Key Takeaways.** This section discusses overarching takeaways that emerged from our analysis across the four schools and the type of change this requires.
- ✔ **Section 3: Implications.** This section discusses key implications for the District's support of these innovative school models.

# Summaries of Case Studies

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## Vaux Big Picture School

At its core, Vaux Big Picture High School (VBPHS or Vaux Big Picture) is about educating one student at a time. The VBPHS learning experience is characterized by three central designs: Advisory, Personalization, and Learning Through Internship. Though VBPHS is managed by Big Picture in a contract agreement with the District, it is a neighborhood school that primarily serves the students of the Sharswood community and allows students from other catchments to fill any remaining spots on a first-come, first-serve basis. In its first year, Vaux was set up for success by having external funding support, a robust planning year, and freedom relative to other District schools, but as a start-up, faced challenges associated with implementing a new model.



### Instructional Core

- ▶ Relationships have been the main focus of the first year at VBPHS, and advisors have worked to intentionally build high quality relationships with students.
- ▶ While rigor and relevance are central to the Big Picture approach, it has been challenging to personalize learning and strike the balance between “freedom and structure” in the first year.



### School Features

- ▶ The Advisory model fosters strong and trusting relationships between advisors and students, which serve as the foundation for successful teaching and learning.
- ▶ VBPHS hired additional staff during the first year to support effective - and consistent - implementation of restorative practices.
- ▶ VBPHS embraces the importance of “continuous improvement” by scheduling instructional time around advisor professional development.
- ▶ VBPHS’s community partnerships have helped facilitate meaningful Real-World Learning experiences and internship opportunities for students.



### Conditions

- ▶ The contract agreement allows VBPHS leadership and operations to function with much more flexibility than traditional public schools.
- ▶ Due to significant external funding support, VBPHS has the ability to address identified needs quickly.
- ▶ Due to a deliberate focus on developing and managing multiple community partnerships in the planning year and Year 1, VBPHS has the makings of a community school.



## Building 21

Building 21 (B21) focuses on creating 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).
- ▶ Due to a deliberate focus on developing and managing multiple community partnerships in the planning year and Year 1, VBPHS has the makings of a community school.

## The Workshop School

At its core, the Workshop School is about helping students develop the skills they need to navigate their own lifelong learning. The Workshop School creates meaningful learning experiences by using hands-on projects that focus on real-world problems and are directly relevant to students' lives and passions. Students participate in these interdisciplinary projects in the morning and attend topical seminars in the afternoon. The Workshop School's model is grounded in the belief that the processes students use to solve problems are as important as the products they create, and students earn more freedom and outside exposure as they progress through school.



### Instructional Core

- ▶ From its inception, the Workshop School has mapped content knowledge and skills onto meaningful real-world experiences; however, the specific skills framework has iterated and become more central over time.
- ▶ Developing student skill in navigating their learning is core to the Workshop School's model and a prioritized area of growth.
- ▶ The Workshop School asks students to demonstrate learning not only on end products but also through the processes they use to create them; however, the latter has been more challenging to assess.



### School Features

- ▶ The Workshop School uses an advisory model as the core structure for facilitating meaningful project-based learning, which creates the opportunity for advisors to build strong relationships with students.
- ▶ The Gateway process serves as a mechanism for ensuring students are prepared for the "Upper House"; however, staff continue to wrestle with how to hold students who don't pass this assessment accountable to their learning.
- ▶ The Workshop School is teacher-led and fosters a strong professional community among educators.



### Conditions

- ▶ The Workshop School's unique approach to learning is made possible through flexibility to alter the daily schedule, but is limited by space constraints.
- ▶ The Workshop School has cultivated a teacher-led environment where staff are empowered to constantly iterate on their approach.
- ▶ The District's graduation requirements and course structure impose some constraints on the school's model.

## Science Leadership Academy

Science Leadership Academy (SLA) takes a human-centered approach to education where people come first. Core values are ubiquitous at SLA and serve as the school’s unifying guidelines, as well as the foundation for a school-wide rubric. All teachers at SLA utilize Understanding by Design (UBD) as the structure by which all curriculum are developed. Taken together, the core values, the rubric, and UBD ensure consistent expectations across the school. Through the use of technology and carefully planned learning experiences, teachers provide students with meaningful opportunities to pursue their own inquiry. Over the years, SLA has been able to sustain its approach by building human-centered systems and structures that reflect its core values.



### Instructional Core

- ▶ SLA’s core values are unifying guidelines that drive the school’s inquiry approach to learning and serve as the foundation for a consistent school-wide rubric.
- ▶ SLA takes a human-centered approach to education, prioritizing the “ethic of care.”



### School Features

- ▶ Teachers at SLA work to carefully plan meaningful learning experiences that allow students the space to pursue their own inquiry.
- ▶ Strong relationships and trust, built through advisories, are the key ingredient to SLA’s cultural fabric.
- ▶ Teachers employ and value formal and informal means of teacher-led collaboration to plan, troubleshoot challenges, and iterate on lessons learned.
- ▶ Family engagement opportunities allow parents to contribute to SLA in the way that is best for them.



### Conditions

- ▶ SLA has institutionalized intentional and interconnected systems and structures that provide educators with support and promote needed accountability.
- ▶ SLA’s technological resources, including software like Slate and Canvas, and hardware like the 1:1 student to laptop ratio, facilitate 21st century learning.
- ▶ SLA has cultivated a consensus-driven environment where staff have permission to fail and learn from that failure.

# OVERVIEW

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While each school's approach has unique features, our analysis surfaced several key takeaways that illuminate how these innovative models are playing out for teachers and students across the four schools.

- ✔ Curriculum and assessment are evolving
- ✔ The real world plays an essential role
- ✔ Relationships are a priority
- ✔ Teachers assume a different role

These takeaways manifest themselves somewhat differently at each school, but below we present commonalities across schools and provide insight on how these types of practices can be supported at the system-wide level. Specifically, we offer thoughts on the **technical and adaptive** change likely needed to lift and sustain these types of innovative approaches across multiple schools. In their article, *A Survival Guide for Leaders* from Harvard Business Review, Heifetz and Linsky describe adaptive vs. technical change:

*The importance—and difficulty—of distinguishing between adaptive and technical change can be illustrated with an analogy. When your car has problems, you go to a mechanic. Most of the time, the mechanic can fix the car. But if your car troubles stem from the way a family member drives, the problems are likely to recur. Treating the problems as purely technical ones—taking the car to the mechanic time and again to get it back on the road—masks the real issues. Maybe you need to get your mother to stop drinking and driving, get your grandfather to give up his driver's license, or get your teenager to be more cautious. Whatever the underlying problems, the mechanic can't solve them. Instead, changes in the family need to occur, and that won't be easy. People will resist the moves, even denying that such problems exist. That's because even those not directly affected by an adaptive change typically experience discomfort when someone upsets a group's or an organization's equilibrium.*

*Such resistance to adaptive change certainly happens in business. Indeed, it's the classic error: Companies treat adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. For example, executives attempt to improve the bottom line by cutting costs across the board. Not only does this avoid the need to make tough choices about which areas should be trimmed, it also masks the fact that the company's real challenge lies in redesigning its strategy.*

*Treating adaptive challenges as technical ones permits executives to do what they have excelled at throughout their careers: solve other people's problems. And it allows others in the organization to enjoy the primordial peace of mind that comes from knowing that their commanding officer has a plan to maintain order and stability. After all, the executive doesn't have to instigate—and the people don't have to undergo—uncomfortable change. Most people would agree that, despite the selective pain of a cost-cutting exercise, it is less traumatic than reinventing a company.*

To be sure, implementing innovative school models requires many technical changes to systems like scheduling and rostering. However, truly supporting - and sustaining - these types of models requires adaptive change that necessitates a different way of conceptualizing the purpose and delivery of education.

## Curriculum and Assessment are Evolving

The Barra Foundation's Catalyst Fund has supported four innovative high schools in Philadelphia -Vaux Big Picture High School (VBPHS or Vaux Big Picture), Building 21 (B21), the Workshop School (WS), and Science Leadership Academy (SLA). Over the last year, ImpactED, in partnership with the Barra Foundation, has engaged in an intensive year of learning about these school models. The schools are located in neighborhoods across the city.

Educators across the four profiled schools voiced their concerns with the adequacy of traditional curriculum and assessments for measuring student success and developing deeper critical and analytical thinking. As a result, these four schools take a different approach to curriculum and assessment.

### ✔ Students are asked to demonstrate learning not only on end products but also through the processes they use to create them.

For example, at the Workshop School, content knowledge is viewed as a building block students need to engage in meaningful learning experiences. Process-oriented skills, such as collaboration, project management, commitment to improve, reflection and self-awareness, critical thinking, and problem-solving, are as critical as the end product to students' success. B21 takes a holistic approach to learning, emphasizing academic competencies, as well as other non-academic skills deemed necessary for post-secondary success. Academic competencies include skills progression in core subjects, such as English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies while habits of success include growth mindset, agency, and collaboration with others.

### ✔ Students share their work with the community through exhibitions, which provides them with an opportunity to exercise their voice and choice.

Across all four schools, students showcase their progress through exhibitions, or presentations of learning. During these presentations, students reflect on their work and share their successes, challenges, and upcoming goals, with their peers, teachers, parent(s), and community members. After each presentation, students are provided with feedback on process-oriented skills (e.g., how well they presented their work, used supporting evidence, and demonstrated reflective skills). Prioritizing student voice means acknowledging students' identity and passion, while incorporating student choice requires ensuring that students take ownership over their work.

This type of shift in curriculum and assessment requires both technical and adaptive change. In partnership with school leaders, the District could lead the work of defining quality measures that align to innovative schools' varying approaches to learning and also develop criteria for high quality curricular materials. These curriculum and 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. The District could utilize lessons learned from the [NGLC's Assessment for Learning Project](#) to inform this work.

## Questions to Consider:

*How can assessment support a broader definition of student success and meet the needs of students, educators, and policymakers?*

*How can we most effectively build educator capacity to gather, interpret, and use evidence of student learning to enhance instruction?*

*What is considered "high-quality" when it comes to instructional materials for students, and how do teachers sustain the heavy lift of individualizing learning?*

## The Real World Plays An Essential Role

Educators across the four profiled schools place value on students navigating success in the real world through internships, field study, or college classes. Educators also seek for students to impact the real world, developing their sense of agency and using their voice to advocate for social change.

### ✔ Students engage in real-world learning experiences outside of school which build valuable skills for post-secondary success.

Across all four schools, students' learning is focused on the real world, through both applied work in school and exposure to internships outside of school. For example, at Vaux Big Picture, students leave school every Wednesday afternoon to embark on Real World Learning Experiences across the city, from museums to hospitals to early childhood centers to clinics and beyond. On these visits, students get a chance to see what it's like to work in real-life professions, building towards the internships which they will participate in during their 10th grade year. To secure internships at the Workshop School, students are responsible for contacting organizations where they would like to intern and managing the placement process themselves. While sometimes frustrating, this experience builds students' resilience and skill for the challenges they will face post high school.

### ✔ Student learning is grounded in the real world.

Teachers report that they try to design curriculum and projects that empower students to understand the impact they can have on the world around them. At SLA, for example, each student has an individualized learning plan (ILP) which culminates in senior Capstone projects of their choice. One current senior is making a film on criminal justice system reform by profiling his uncle who was recently let out of prison after being sentenced to life without parole at age 14. At B21, students explore different pre-professional "Personalized Learning Pathways." 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.

This type of real-world learning requires both technical and adaptive change, on the part of the District as well as school-based educators. The technical lift involves scheduling, transportation, and training, which could be eased if the District provided more autonomy to schools. More challenging, however, is the adaptive change that school-based educators must make to ensure effective alignment of real world learning activities with rigorous skill development. Students may attend internships, or enroll in community college classes, but as in the real world, some internships and college courses are more engaging and rigorous than others. The District could support schools by providing quality criteria for real world learning and expectations for alignment to learning goals.

## Questions to Consider:

*What is the best way for students to navigate success in the real world, and what are the opportunities - such as internships or community college classes - that bolster this type of exposure?*

*What types of learning experiences help students impact the real world and take action on their priorities and concerns?*

*What supports do educators need to ensure quality real-world experiences for students given the significant differentiation that can occur with off-site opportunities?*

## Relationships are a Priority

Educators across the four profiled schools believe that quality relationships are at the core of their work. These relationships are created and strengthened through intentional structures such as advisory, which prioritizes building community and empowering students to take ownership over their learning.

### ✔ Relationships have been a focus in the early years of the school start up phase and are critical to schools' cultural fabric.

Across all four profiled schools, relationships are paramount, whether that's represented through SLA's "ethic of care" where "students come first as people" or the Workshop School's design principle that puts "community first." Relationships have been a particular focus in the start up years, where educators build deep personal relationships with students and their families and get to know their lives outside of school. At Vaux Big Picture, which is currently in its first year, leadership shared how the focus on relationship building was critical to building the school's culture.

### ✔ Relationships are cultivated through the advisory model.

All four profiled schools discuss how their advisory model is used to build strong relationships; however, the structure of these advisories varies across schools. At B21, advisory happens each morning, and students stay with the same advisories over their four years. At SLA, students also stay with their advisories for the full four years leading to strong relationships, but advisory happens at the end of the day twice a week. At Vaux Big Picture and the Workshop School, advisories extend for a longer period of time. In addition to the focus on relationship building, all of the project-based work happens in advisories. Despite their differences, advisories across the four schools have laid the foundation for

Prioritizing relationships requires technical change, particularly in building the advisory structure into scheduling and identifying a high-level scope and sequence to guide the approach. To implement advisories, the District would need to grant school leaders autonomy to alter daily schedules and rosters to create the time and value for daily advisories. But prioritizing relationships also requires adaptive change. Indeed, success is dependent on a conscious shift in power dynamics in the classroom, replacing a teacher-directed environment with deep, trusting, and authentic relationships between students and educators. This shift is discussed in more detail in the following section. Given the challenges facing the student population, advisors must be comfortable with themselves and understand their own identity and power, so they can effectively build deep relationships with students facing significant trauma.

## Questions to Consider:

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*What does it mean for schools to treat students first as people?*

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*What systems must be implemented or changed for all schools in Philadelphia to employ an advisory structure within their model and schedule?*

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*What type of supports do educators need to build strong relationships with students, many of whom are facing significant trauma?*

## Teachers Assume a Different Role

It requires a particular mindset to be a successful teacher at the four schools profiled in this analysis. Indeed, teachers take on a different role, building strong relationships with students through a more holistic and restorative approach. In this new power dynamic, teachers can struggle to find their “sweet spot” between developing positive relationships with students and holding students accountable to abiding by shared norms and producing high quality work. Across schools, teachers are provided with considerable autonomy to navigate this tension and determine the relational and instructional approach that will work best for their classrooms.

### ✔ Teachers engage in a new power dynamic where students are expected to take ownership of their own learning and behavior.

Traditional models set up teacher-centric classrooms, but these four schools - in their own unique ways - seek to put students at the center of the learning design. Staff across all four schools report that it can be challenging to know how best to balance student autonomy with structure and build relationships while also holding students accountable for academic and behavioral expectations. In the words of SLA leadership, empowerment is the best thing about SLA but it can also be the worst thing about SLA. The challenge is when students feel so empowered that it starts to turn into entitlement. To address this challenge, SLA leadership talks about the importance of creating a “negotiated space” where students recognize others’ needs when they exercise their voice and choice.

### ✔ Teachers are provided with a great deal of autonomy to try new practices and iterate on their instructional approach.

Across all four schools, staff culture mirrors student culture. Teachers have ownership over their approach to instruction and view failure and iteration as a necessary part of the learning process. For example, at the Workshop School, one of the core tenets is that “a first draft is not a final draft.” Staff at the Workshop School (and across four schools) talk openly about approaches that have not been successful and how they have used lessons learned to continuously improve their practice.

This shifting role for teachers is mostly an issue of adaptive change. As educators rethink the traditional school power structures alongside students, they could benefit from professional learning on how to cultivate strong relationships while still maintaining high academic and behavioral expectations. Even for teachers with years of experience in the field, working within this type of model requires adopting an entirely new mindset, and the autonomy and constant iteration can be both empowering and exhausting. While mostly adaptive, there may be reasonable technical solutions that the District can consider to support this change. For example, the District can continue to host special recruiting opportunities for candidates interested in working in these types of models and provide flexibility in hiring and transfer requirements. District leadership can also partner with universities to offer pre-service and in-service professional development focused on supporting teachers to address the challenges associated with an expanded role. Additionally, the District could provide adaptive coaching to support alignment of beliefs and interventions employed by teachers.

## Questions to Consider:

*How can educators maintain this more empathetic approach with students - through prioritizing relationships - while still holding students accountable for academic expectations and community norms?*

*What types of professional learning do educators need to be successful given a different role and power dynamic?*

*How can districts - and schools - promote strategies for work life/balance among educators?*



# Implications

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At the innovative schools profiled in this report, students engage in a strikingly different type of learning experience when compared to traditional high schools. However, there's no single definition of what is meant by an “innovative” approach to education. Indeed, each of the four profiled schools has a unique philosophy and set of guiding principles, which informs the specific learning model.

Much still remains to be learned about the impact of these innovative models on student outcomes, as well as how various approaches would transfer to other schools. Collectively, the schools profiled in this report demonstrate signs of success, as well as some of the inherent tensions associated with implementing these types of learning models in a more traditional system. Despite variation in their approach, all four schools acknowledge that curriculum and assessment needs to evolve to prepare students for an ever changing post-secondary world and that this evolution should emphasize the importance of real-world learning. They also recognize that meaningful relationships are integral to success and that teachers must assume a new role where they empower students to take ownership over their own learning. As these innovative models iterate on their approach, there's an opportunity to improve implementation to ensure all students have access to high quality learning.

Importantly, implementing this type of innovative approach requires careful thought about the context and the enabling conditions for success. This final section discusses key implications for the District to consider when supporting implementation of similar innovative models, aligned to the following conditions:

- ✔ **Structures**  
Formal and informal structures
- ✔ **Resources**  
Financial, human, and community resources
- ✔ **Environment**  
External factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations, and performance.

We recommend that the District consider working collaboratively with school leaders to develop a set of key design criteria and implementation standards for schools in the Innovation Network. These criteria would articulate a common language and set of practices, as well as expectations for leaders and teachers, that would support innovative schools with implementation. It would also provide more traditional schools with ideas on how to adapt their practices to better align with innovative models. This effort could be informed by the recommendations below.

## **Structures: Support systems and structures that align to innovative models**

- ✔ **Provide innovative schools with needed flexibility to measure impact, but couple this autonomy with clear accountability.**

All four schools have benefited from scheduling flexibility, which has allowed for advisory blocks and off-site internships. However, staff at several of the schools still spend considerable effort trying to align their core skills with the District's course and graduation requirements. To ensure that needed autonomy is

balanced with clear accountability, the District should involve Innovation Network schools in the creation of metrics which would allow for effective monitoring of both the model's implementation and impact on student progress, but also provide the necessary freedom to try new approaches.

✔ **Consider incorporating the advisory structure into all schools by allowing scheduling and rostering flexibility.**

Advisories at the four profiled schools have laid the foundation for meaningful, trusting relationships between students and staff. All District schools could benefit from this structural shift shown to be successful in practice both nationally and at these schools. To implement advisories, the District would need to grant school leaders autonomy to alter daily schedules and rosters to create the time and value for daily advisories. The District should work with school leaders to create an overview of the essential criteria necessary for a successful advisory to support high quality implementation.

**Resources: *Ensure schools have the necessary human and material resources***

✔ **Work with schools to support the development of next-generation assessment systems and high quality instructional materials.**

The District 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. The District should utilize lessons learned from the NGLC's Assessment for Learning Project to inform this work. Additionally, the District should determine what supports schools need to help educators develop high quality curricular resources and customize lessons to a range of students' needs and preferences. In particular, educators need support to strike the balance between students learning at their own pace and achieving rigorous standards.

✔ **Provide schools with the facilities they need to execute their model.**

Many schools' systems and structures are tied to their physical space. For instance, at SLA a large table in the main office acts as the defacto teaching lounge, where teachers and students gather throughout the day to build relationships. When SLA moves to a new space next year, the District should support the school's efforts to preserve these cultural aspects in a new environment. At VBPHS, the school has benefited from a partnership with the Philadelphia Housing Authority that provides flexibility in how space is used to realize the school's mission. These experiences demonstrate the importance of the physical facility in helping schools realize their mission.

**Environment: *Strike the right balance between autonomy & accountability***

✔ **Use the Innovation Network as a laboratory for innovation in the District.**

Innovation Network schools would benefit from a level of autonomy that allows educators to innovate through an iterative approach and empowers stakeholders to take ownership over the continuous learning process. However, as noted above, to ensure that needed autonomy is balanced with clear accountability,

the District should involve Innovation Network schools in the creation of metrics and best practices that would ensure effective implementation and provide high quality learning experiences for students.

✔ **Consider expanding the number of “partnership schools” in Philadelphia, but ensure clear standards of accountability.**

Partnership Schools, or “contract schools” as they are also known, have the potential to turn around schools more quickly than District capacity allows, making them an attractive option for districts seeking a dramatic effect in a historically underperforming school. While they have strengths, these agreements often require considerable periods of negotiating before being finalized, and the quality of operators varies. In the contract agreement between the District and VBPHS, VBPHS is subject to a number of accountability measures, including student attendance, credit earnings, retention, and the number of violent incidents. If VBPHS’ performance is unacceptable in any of those metrics, the District is able to terminate the contract. In exploring this recommendation, the District should consider choosing operators known for strong instructional practices, utilize strong accountability practices, and stay closely involved in the start-up year.



SLA



Vaux Big Picture High School

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