

Sharing the Story of Impact: Philadelphia Innovative High Schools

Vaux Big Picture High School Case Study

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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.

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

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 in the Greater
Philadelphia region,
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THE BARRA FOUNDATION

OVERVIEW

Background

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. Other projects include the construction of mixed-income housing, a new local headquarters for PHA, and a supermarket.

The former Vaux school was closed in 2013 as a result of the District’s significant budget gap, declining enrollment, and historically low academic performance. In 2016, PHA bought the school. Nearly two years prior to this purchase, Big Picture had submitted a proposal to open a new high school in Philadelphia, indicating their wishes to open a school in North Philadelphia. 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. All of the teachers, known as “advisors,” and administration are District employees. Due to the nature of the contract between SDP and Big Picture, Big Picture manages the school from an operational standpoint as well as a financial one. This arrangement is a first for the District.

The Big Picture learning model is a project-based learning model, lending itself to the idea that student outcomes will improve if student voice is heavily incorporated into learning processes. Every student has an individualized learning plan (ILP), created collaboratively by students, advisors, and families.

In Year 1, VBPHS was intentional about scaffolding the roll-out of the Big Picture learning model by incorporating more traditional forms of instruction to support students, the majority of whom were performing below grade level. For this reason, advisors did not rely on ILPs as often as the model suggests in the start-up year. However, preparation for students to begin internships in Year 2 is off to a strong start. Students have engaged in this preparation primarily through Real World Learning (RWL) experiences, where they leave school on Wednesday afternoons and visit various cultural and industrial sites to gain an idea of what it means to follow one’s interests and passions in the world of work in a wide variety of organizations and settings.

Demographics

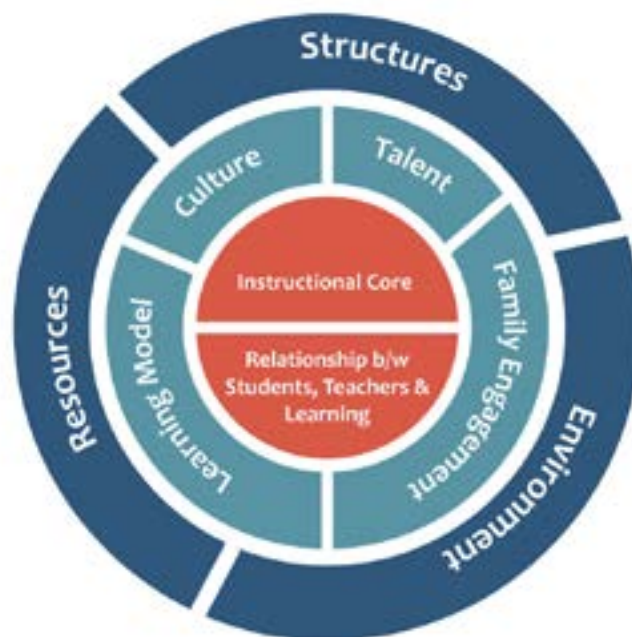
94% Black/African American	2% Multi-Racial / Other	0% Asian	0% English Language Learners
2% White (Non-Hispanic)	2% Hispanic/Latino	68% Economically Disadvantaged	23% Special Education (IEP)

Methodology

The Barra Foundation contracted with ImpactED to learn more about the first year of implementation at VBPHS. 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



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SUMMARY

At its core, VBPHS is about educating one student at a time. The VBPHS learning experience is characterized by three central designs: Advisory, Personalization, and Learning Through Internship. In its first year, VBPHS 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.



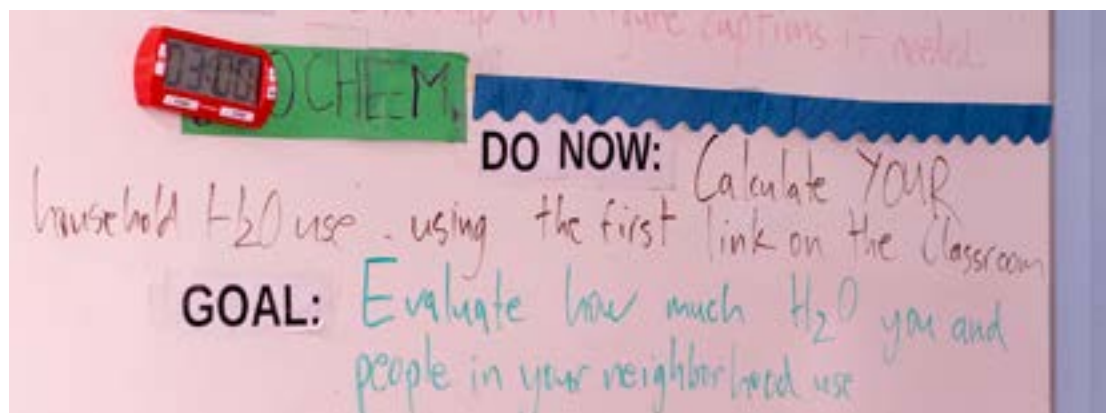
School Features

- ▶ 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 (RWL) experiences and internship opportunities for students.



Conditions

- ▶ The contract agreement allows VBPHS leadership and operations to function with much more flexibility than other 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.





INSTRUCTIONAL CORE

The nature of the learning experience at VBPHS is grounded in the **3 R's: Relationships, Rigor, and Relevance**. VBPHS aims to provide underserved students with access to progressive, meaningful, and legitimate learning experiences that are highly personalized to students' needs and interests.



- ✔ **Relationships have been the main focus of the first year at Vaux, and advisors have worked to intentionally build high quality relationships with students.**

In the Big Picture model, the role of teachers, or “advisors,” is about more than just guiding students through the academic process; it also involves building deep personal relationships with students by getting to know their lives outside of school. A survey conducted in the fall of the first year indicated that these efforts at building relationships are off to a strong start, as the majority of students reported trusting the adults in the building. Leadership reports that this trust has helped to mitigate behavioral challenges and has contributed to high rates of student attendance (between 85-95% average daily attendance).

Advisors have built deep knowledge about students' home lives, like [Advisor], for example. One of the students in his advisory was in an altercation recently but was able to keep his cool and follow directions even while escalated. This was new for him...he hadn't been able to do that in the beginning of the year. I really credit [that teacher] because this student knew that there are adults here who have his best intentions at heart.

- Principal



- ✔ **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.**

VBPHS is guided by the principle of reaching “one student at a time,” acknowledging that all students learn in different ways. Content and curriculum are almost entirely based on students’ interests and strengths. Traditional assessments, such as papers, tests, and quizzes, are not prioritized at VBPHS. Rather, students are assessed on their abilities to choose topics about which they are interested or passionate, conduct research, and present their findings to their peers. Given significant challenges students faced at the beginning of the year (e.g., only one student was on grade level), VBPHS has not implemented the full Big Picture model. Instead, over the first year, advisors have been working to ensure that all students are LTI (learning through internship) ready. In so doing, leadership notes that it has been challenging for advisors to strike the right balance between student autonomy and needed accountability. This has been complicated by a lack of a rigorous instructional design to provide advisors with clear guidelines for structuring projects. Developing a more engaging, student-centered instructional design and a clear scope and sequence is a high priority goal for Year 2.

There’s a tension between freedom and structure that we haven’t been able to balance. Right now, we’re focusing on making lessons more structured, more chunked. We’re focusing on how to hold students accountable. Next year, I think we’ll be able to focus more on the [personalization] piece.

- Principal



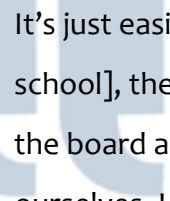
SCHOOL-LEVEL FEATURES

Learning Model

To realize the 3 R's, the learning model at VBPHS is characterized by three central designs: **Advisory, Personalization, and Learning Through Internship**. The Advisory component has been instrumental in allowing advisors and students to build strong relationships. Through Real World Learning (RWL) experiences, students have delved deeper into the concept of Learning Through Internship and explored professional opportunities that are relevant to their interests. Students draw from these experiences, as well as projects they complete in school, to prepare and present culminating stories of growth with peers and families in exhibitions each quarter.

- ✔ **The Advisory model fosters strong and trusting relationships between advisors and students, which serve as the foundation for successful teaching and learning.**

Every day at VBPHS begins with Advisory. A core goal of the Advisory model is for students and advisors to see and treat the advisory as a “second family.” Most students will spend four years with the same advisor and same group of students, which offers advisors the opportunity to build deep relationships and use those relationships as a foundation for successful teaching and learning over four years. Advisors create an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) for each student to guide this relationship. In Advisory, students do the majority of their project-based work to prepare for RWL experiences, but they also have structured discussions about tools and strategies for post-secondary success, such as resume-building and interview prep and unstructured discussions about their lives outside of school. The first period advisory has allowed students and advisors to understand each other on a deeper level, and trusting relationships are burgeoning.



It's just easier to learn here. At [my other school], they would just throw stuff up on the board and we had to figure it out for ourselves. Here they actually try to teach us and actually get to know us.

- Student

- ✔ **Students have become increasingly invested in Exhibitions throughout the year.**

In end of semester Exhibitions, students highlight key takeaways from the projects they have completed in their seminar classes, as well as from RWL experiences throughout the quarter. Advisors shared that not all students took the end of first quarter mini-presentation (pre-Exhibition) seriously. By the end of the first semester, however, students became increasingly invested in their Exhibitions, spending more time preparing and ensuring their families can attend far in advance. Advisors attribute this shift to the connections students are beginning to make between the value of their school work and their real-world learning experiences. Staff expectations for Exhibitions also became more rigorous; not only were students expected to present to their peers, but they were also required to give constructive and respectful feedback to others.

I think they're now starting to realize they need to take things seriously and make the most of their RWL research and experiences. They're starting to make the connections between what we spend the time doing leading up to Exhibitions and the presentations themselves.

-Advisor

✔ **Students have been exposed to RWL experiences related to their interests, but advisors have had more challenges making in-class activities relevant.**

On most Wednesday afternoons, students leave school to embark on Real World Learning Experiences. Before visits, students conduct preliminary research, and during visits students take notes, or engage in "Anthropology." For many students, RWL experiences have been a chance to see parts of Philadelphia completely unfamiliar to them; indeed, they have been all 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 and take a significant step towards post-secondary achievement. As represented in the quote, parents appreciate that their students get to be exposed to these types of opportunities, noting that this doesn't typically happen until later in the high school years. Advisors have also attempted to make classwork relevant to students' lives, but the follow-through has been challenging. For example, in English seminar, students were reading Romeo and Juliet and the advisor hooked students by asking them to consider and discuss what it would be like to be engaged at 13, Juliet's age in the play. Following that, however, it was challenging to make the content relatable to students' lives.

Seeing these students experience their city in new ways has been amazing. Some of them haven't seen the world outside of their neighborhoods.

- Advisor

I appreciate the Wednesday trips. [My daughter] comes back with stuff written down about what she can do. The school really gets children involved, students want to go to school. Students typically have to wait until 11th or 12th grade to get these kinds of experiences. It's nice to have a school that's behind her.

- Parent

Culture

The culture at Vaux depends on the existence of meaningful relationships between students and staff. VBPHS aims to make discipline entirely restorative, but in practice, only a few elements currently fit that description. VBPHS staff have varying levels of experience using restorative practices, which may explain some of the inconsistency with which these practices were implemented in the start-up year.

✔ Vaux hired additional staff during the first year to support effective - and consistent - implementation of restorative practices.

VBPHS' goal is for disciplinary practices to be entirely restorative and meaningful for students. When students receive a series of infractions, they are referred to "harm circles," which function similarly to a detention in that students must stay after school to participate, but are very different in that students engage in community building through group discussion and reflection. Students are asked to reflect on the harm they have caused to the community, to develop a plan to restore the harm, and to explicate the personal changes they must make to prevent future harm. If it becomes necessary to suspend a student out of school, students, parents, and school leaders meet upon the student's return to school to discuss the incident that transpired and create a plan collaboratively to ensure it is not repeated. At the end of this reinstatement meeting, the student completes and signs a reinstatement contract. This approach has had a positive impact on school culture in the start-up year. For example, a result of these meetings, a group of girls who were in conflict earlier in the year ended up creating a peace circle for their friends and two of them co-wrote a letter to their peers explaining what they had learned. However, VBPHS has had challenges consistently implementing these restorative elements throughout the year. In response, in February, VBPHS hired a Restorative Specialist to build more deliberate systems and practices to support the restorative approach. This additional staffing support will allow VBPHS to organize harm circles by the type of harm and replace traditional discipline practices such as suspension with more meaningful practices like restorative conferences and actions (e.g., having students engage in restoration to the community through service).

They're harder on me here. At my other school, if I did something wrong, they would just call my mom. Here [my teachers] actually talk to me and help me figure out what happened. We talk about right and wrong.

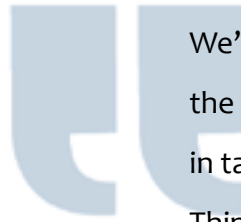
- Student

It's definitely a work in progress, but global consistency in terms of climate is a must for next year. Everyone needs to be on the same page. That's not happening now, and it really doesn't lend itself to student engagement.

- Principal

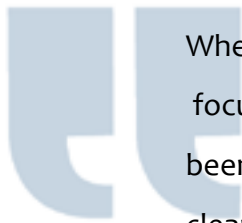
- ✔ **Ownership of learning is an essential element of the Vaux approach; however, advisors have had challenges consistently holding students accountable for taking ownership of their learning.**

Helping students to take ownership over their lives and their learning is regarded as the top priority at VBPHS. Leaders feel strongly that when students begin talking about their learning and asking about others' learning, they become more invested in the process. For this reason, advisors devote significant time to building projects around RWL experiences and facilitating student discussion about projects in Advisory to help students prepare for Exhibitions. However, students are not consistently practicing the behaviors necessary to demonstrate ownership of learning, such as coming to class on time and refraining from browsing the internet during class. Advisors do not always hold students accountable if they fail to engage in these foundational habits of ownership. VPBHS leadership reported that they likely relied too heavily on the the advisor-advisee relationship and did not do enough work establishing concrete behavioral norms and expectations across Advisories.



We're interested in building up the foundational habits necessary in taking ownership of learning. Things like budgeting time, making smart choices, delaying gratification, and prioritizing.

- Advisor



When we started out this year, there was so much to do. I think we focused too much on teaching and learning, when we really should have been thinking about climate and culture. We didn't think about norming on clear cultural expectations for advisors. It was like we skipped the basics.

-Principal



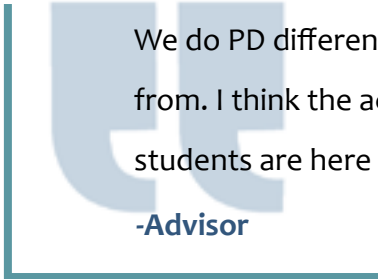
Talent

The approach to cultivating talent at Vaux is centered around the ideas of “teachers as advisors” and “continuous improvement.” For many students and families, the advisor is the central figure in their school experience, and VBPHS devotes significant time and resources to professional development. To encourage continuous improvement, Vaux has structured time for teacher professional development. However, in Year 1, there is only one advisor per subject area and no common planning time, which makes planning a solo effort and collaboration for interdisciplinary projects difficult.

✔ Teachers employ and value formal and informal means of teacher-led collaboration to plan, troubleshoot challenges, and iterate on lessons learned.

Twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, students have a one-hour delayed start, and advisors begin the day with an hour of professional development. This is an unorthodox practice, as most public schools choose to hold staff-wide PD for the one advisor in-service day a month designated

by the District. Feeling strongly that full staff development needs to happen more often, VBPHS leadership made the decision to alter the student schedule so that staff can fully engage in PD, during school hours and free from distractions. Staff members appear to be highly invested in morning PD sessions; they arrive promptly and take advantage of the time available to engage in whatever the facilitator has proposed, whether it is creating an action plan for implementing a new procedure or intentionally splitting an upcoming lesson into discrete “chunks.”



We do PD differently from the school I came from. I think the act that it happens before students are here makes it easier to engage.

-Advisor

✔ Advisors have the autonomy to design curriculum and projects best suited to student needs and interests which has led to a variation in the quality and alignment of learning materials.

Prior to the start-up year, Big Picture provided VBPHS with example instructional materials. However, leadership noted that these materials weren't appropriate for the Vaux population. As a result, advisors spent Year 1 proposing their own plans, and the principal worked to support them one-on-one. While advisors appreciate the flexibility to tailor materials to meet their students' needs, they have lacked the necessary time to ensure that the materials are consistently high quality. It has also been challenging to ensure rigorous content as nearly all students started the year behind grade level in both reading and math. In response, VBPHS has been working to provide teachers with requested support for project design.

✔ In Year 1, no two advisors are responsible for the same subject and did not have common planning time, which can make project collaboration challenging.

Since Vaux started with ninth grade and will build a grade each year, there was only one advisor per subject area in Year 1, which made planning a solo effort for advisors. Also, due to the fact that advisors' prep periods were at different times, advisors did not have common planning time, making the required collaboration on interdisciplinary project planning difficult. This also reduced opportunities for staff to collaborate around how to better implement restorative practices, on both a school-wide level and on an individual classroom level.

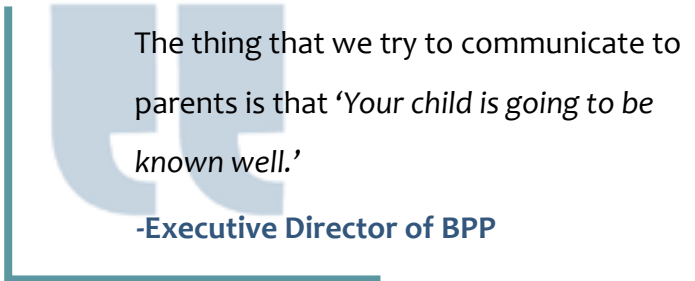
Family & Community Engagement

Vaux approaches family and community engagement by empowering families and community members to not only participate in school activities, but also to engage in decision-making by voicing their opinions at School Advisory Council meetings. Advisors are expected to communicate with families regularly; in turn, families are expected to actively engage in supporting VBPHS educational efforts at home, and occasionally at school.

- ✔ **Fostering connections with families and community members is critical to the learning model; however, VBPHS staff have had challenges engaging all families.**

Advisors are expected to call home to discuss student progress at least every other week, and most advisors report speaking to parents and families often, usually over the phone, but occasionally in person as well. Parents have advisors' personal cell phone numbers and are encouraged to reach out at any time. As part of the Big Picture model, VBPHS advisors are

also expected to make home visits to each family before the year begins, but for various reasons not all homes were visited. In part, this occurred because advisors did not gain access to information about their rosters until August, leaving them with limited time to schedule and complete home visits before the first day of school. Additionally, not all advisors were ready to go on home visits at the beginning of the year given their more limited understanding of the school model. In response, VBPHS leadership has prioritized training advisors on home visits for the upcoming school year.



The thing that we try to communicate to parents is that *'Your child is going to be known well.'*

-Executive Director of BPP

- ✔ **Families are highly engaged in student Exhibitions, but VBPHS has had more difficulty involving parents in broader decision-making.**

VBPHS expects that students invite their families to – and ensure they attend – Exhibitions, even if the presentations have to occur outside of school hours or in students' homes. Leadership sets this expectation at the beginning of the year by emphasizing that this requirement is part of being deemed "LTI-Ready." Further, the VBPHS Parent Compact, signed by all parents, outlines the various expectations around parental participation. During the most recent round of Exhibitions, 95% of families attended, and families are generally positive about their students' overall experiences at VBPHS, with 76% of families reporting being satisfied or very satisfied on a recent parent survey. Additionally, results from the same survey indicate that over 90% of parents feel that VBPHS is a welcome environment for parents. While parents report high levels of satisfaction, VBPHS leadership has had more challenges involving families and the community in broader decision-making. Specifically, parent attendance at School Advisory Council (SAC) meetings has been a considerable challenge, as it has been difficult to invest parents in the value of this structure. However, continued efforts at engagement are starting to pay off, with the most recent SAC meeting (which featured a discussion on the Big Picture founder's book) having the highest attendance to date.

✔ **VBPHS's community partnerships have helped facilitate meaningful RWL experiences and internship opportunities for students.**

VBPHS has developed strong internal partnerships with Montgomery Early Learning Centers, the Community College of Philadelphia, and PHA. As a result, VBPHS will have the space and capacity to offer early childhood learning and adult education classes in the building. As these resources are further developed, students will have the opportunity to complete internships with these in-house partners in 10th grade and beyond. VBPHS has also cultivated strong partnerships with more than 50 organizations outside of the school, including La Colombe, Dock Street Brewery, Temple University Schools of Nursing and Dentistry, and is currently exploring a partnership with The NET to provide psychological services. Every Wednesday, students leave the building to go on a field trip to a different potential internship site, and students will have the opportunity to secure internships at several of these sites as well. On these visits, students have multiple opportunities to conduct research, ask questions, and discuss what it would take to be successful in professions, taking significant steps toward LTI readiness and post-secondary achievement.

Having had the opportunity to see these kids on a RWL experience, I have to say it's pretty awesome. As soon as they're out of the school environment, some of them totally change...the behaviors are gone. They're engaging with the world in new ways.

-Advisor





CONDITIONS

There are several conditions that have supported VBPHS's Year 1 implementation efforts. Scheduling flexibility and freedom from District regulation has allowed VBPHS leadership to make creative decisions about how to maximize time spent on professional development and minimize time-intensive accountability measures. The external funding support has been instrumental in the school's ability to fill gaps quickly.

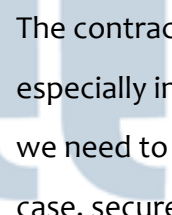
✔ **The contract agreement allows VBPHS leadership to function with much more flexibility than other traditional public schools.**

With the contract flexibility, VBPHS is able to start each day with Advisory and alter the student schedule to incorporate twice-weekly staff development. Additionally, given the way the contract is written, Big Picture, as the contractor, is responsible for overseeing the entire administrative staff and has total autonomy over personnel decisions. As a result of this autonomy, the Executive Director (ED) of BPP has the freedom and flexibility to devote significant time to managing the VBPHS principal, who described his relationship with the ED as functioning much like a partnership. Given this relationship, the principal's time at school is protected, allowing him to devote most of his time to improving the teaching and learning experience at VBPHS. The ED is ultimately responsible for both the principal and VBPHS's overall success, but because the principal manages daily operations, the ED has the ability to spend more time evaluating the success of the model and managing external relations.

✔ **Due to significant external funding support, Vaux has the ability to address identified needs quickly.**

The additional funding flexibility has been especially useful in helping to quickly address identified gaps in talent and resources. VBPHS fundraises an additional \$1 million per year to support student and staffing needs, as well as discretionary items, such as Chromebooks – the student-Chromebook ratio is 1-1. Students have access to a beautifully-restored and spacious learning environment and high-quality learning materials. If VBPHS

leadership determines that additional positions or resources are needed, they are able make the case to external funders and secure those resources with relative ease. For example, VBPHS was recently seeking to add on a dean position, billed as a Restoration Specialist, and within two weeks, they were able to find and extend an offer to a highly-qualified candidate using external resources.



The contract part of this is really great, especially in terms of funding flexibility. If we need to hire someone, we can make the case, secure the funding and choose the right person.

-Principal

- ✔ VBPHS was able to devote significant resources to developing and managing multiple community partnerships in the planning year and Year 1, allowing it to function as a community school.

Unlike traditional schools, VBPHS has the ability to dedicate a leadership position to community engagement. The School Design Coordinator develops and manages community partnerships and does the heavy lifting in designating different RWL sites, around which advisors develop projects. Partnerships with early childhood education centers and local colleges open the door to offering early learning and adult education classes in the building. Partnerships with local businesses and organizations create opportunities for Real World Learning Experiences and later, internships. Resilience specialists, unique to the Big Picture model, play a large role in building and maintaining community partnerships as they put together events like the Community Resource Fair where families and community members received information and services related to elderly care, early childhood education, employment, housing, GED classes, pregnancy, and parenting.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For Vaux Big Picture School

- ✔ **Continue to invest in current efforts to create and implement school-wide systems and procedures to undergird the learning model and guide daily operations at Vaux.**

Throughout the planning year, Vaux leaders focused on preparing the building for students, recruiting staff, making key community partnerships, and learning the Big Picture model. As the year began, leaders realized that basic systems and structures that ensure operations run smoothly, such as consistent entry, exit, and hallway transition procedures had not been standardized. Leaders have been working with advisors in twice-weekly PD sessions to help teachers establish norms and consistently hold students accountable to them. This continued investment will positively impact the schoolwide and classroom culture, cut down on negative behaviors, and maximize instructional time, allowing rigorous teaching and learning to happen more consistently.

- ✔ **Consider implementing a school-wide behavior management system focused on restorative practices.**

Some VBPHS advisors have implemented behavior management systems in their individual classrooms, but it has been challenging to invest students in these systems because of advisors' variation in consistency of implementation. Taking the time to invest advisors and students into a standardized system of behavior management would ensure consistency and minimize confusion. Further, VBPHS leaders have indicated a desire to make discipline completely, rather than only partially, restorative. Vaux could consider investing time and resources into implementing a fully-restorative behavior management system based on approaches of schools who have successfully implemented Restorative Justice programs.

- ✔ **Build on current efforts to ensure students have access to high-quality learning materials and relevant instruction by giving advisors more intentional support around project planning.**

Learning materials that Vaux advisors use are not consistently high-quality and not all teachers have received ample support around project planning throughout the year. Vaux leadership should consider how best to provide advisors with an arsenal of high-quality materials that speak to the unique experience of attending Vaux. Ideally, materials would be personalized to the student population, differentiated to cater to students' needs, and rich in content. To that end, there are a few options that VBPHS could consider:

- ▶ Strategically developing them in-house during the summer in between Year 1 and Year 2.
- ▶ Altering the materials provided by Big Picture to make them more rigorous and relevant to the VBPHS student population.
- ▶ Drawing materials from schools that have successfully implemented the project-based learning approach with students from similar backgrounds who have similar strengths and challenges.

Regardless of the approach, leaders should consider how best to use the twice weekly professional development session as a space to ensure consistency of implementation.

For Other Schools

- ✔ **Take advantage of a planning year before launching to engage community partners and develop a full scope and sequence for each grade level.**

VBPHS had a robust planning year during which they built out several prominent community partnerships. The community engagement work during the planning year laid the foundation for meaningful student RWL experiences in the first year. In retrospect, VBPHS leadership reports wishing they had also used the planning year to develop a scope and sequence to support advisors in planning instruction. Taking this step before the launch would ensure that all staff are on the same page regarding the depth and breadth of content to be taught at each grade level and the development of the content across grade levels.

- ✔ **Create and implement effective and efficient systems and procedures that undergird the learning model.**

VBPHS was heavily focused on developing systems of teaching and learning during the planning year and did not invest as heavily in promoting clear systems to manage school climate and culture. Some advisors have implemented behavior management systems in their individual classrooms, but it has been challenging to invest students in these systems because advisors use these systems with varying consistency. Managing student behavior is challenging without a defined schoolwide system of incentives and consequences. Beyond managing student behavior, basic systems and structures, such as consistent entry, exit, and hallway transition procedures, would help ensure school operations run smoothly. This investment will positively impact the schoolwide and classroom culture, cut down on negative behaviors, and maximize instructional time, which will allow for more rigorous teaching and learning to happen consistently.

- ✔ **Focus on recruiting the right talent to enact the spirit of the learning model and ensure ample supports are in place.**

Throughout the planning year, VBPHS leaders were thoroughly invested in recruiting and hiring the right staff members for their school, prioritizing the concept of “teachers as advisors” and knowing that this first group of teachers would be instrumental in the school’s success. Given these efforts, the advisors hired in the planning year are committed to promoting positive student outcomes and continuously improving their own practice. However, they need additional support and actionable feedback to elevate the level of teaching and learning. Leveraging staff in the building to coach teachers on classroom management, ensuring teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials, and using time strategically during PD sessions to offer time to work collaboratively will ensure that teachers have the support needed to execute the learning model.

For Districts

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

Advisories at Vaux have laid the foundation for meaningful, trusting relationships between students and advisors. District schools could benefit from this structural shift shown to be successful in practice both nationally and at VBPHS. To implement advisories, districts would need to grant school leaders autonomy

to alter daily schedules and rosters to create time and space for daily advisories; traditional schools may be able to benefit from this evidence-based practice.

- ✔ **Consider expanding the number of “partnership schools,” especially in neighborhoods lacking quality options.**

Partnership Schools, or “contract schools” as they are also known, have the potential to be change agents for communities. Often, they have the ability and resources 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. Turnaround efforts are notoriously challenging and in a contract agreement, if the operator is unsuccessful, the district is ultimately held responsible. 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, districts should consider choosing operators known for strong instructional practices, utilize strong accountability practices, and stay closely involved in the start-up year.

- ✔ **Consider giving principals hiring autonomy throughout the year.**

Having the autonomy to interview and select the right advisor for a vacancy is crucial for all schools, as placing teachers in schools arbitrarily can be damaging for students. VBPHS devoted significant resources to recruiting and selecting high quality staff members. The autonomy to do so proved extremely valuable, as having strong advisors is central to the success of the learning model. If the union contract requirements prove to be a barrier, districts should work to ensure that teacher placement is as collaborative as possible on the part of districts’ recruitment team and school principals.

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).



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