



BLACKSTONE ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL OVERVIEW

A place of family & community





Introduction

Bernice Browne is a senior at Blackstone Academy Charter School. She moved to Providence, Rhode Island, from Liberia when she was eight. “The biggest shock was the cold! I still don’t like it,” she laughs as she talks about the change from Western Africa to the United States. Bernice heard about Blackstone as a middle schooler and decided to attend—and she has never regretted her decision. “I like how they are about student voice. They provide us with resources and opportunities, especially within our community for ways that we can help out.”

Bernice’s story as an immigrant is common at Blackstone. The Rhode Island high school attracts students from three cities—Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls—and most of the student body are immigrants or children of immigrants. “I will say this, as this is sort of stereotypical, but it is the truth,” says Carolyn Sheehan, Blackstone’s executive director. “We have a lot of kids who are immigrant kids or first generation. And because of that, they feel a lot of responsibility on themselves. You know, they know their parents went through a lot to be here.” Educators at Blackstone feel the same sense of responsibility when it comes to the students and it carries through to the mission.

Blackstone is on a quiet suburban street in Pawtucket in an old factory building. A smaller school, serving 350 students, it first opened its doors in 2002. The essence of the school—its secret sauce—is rooted in two main qualities: relationships and community. “It’s such a wonderful place to work. I say work, but it doesn’t even feel like work because it’s such an incredible community,” says Brianna Balke, a science teacher. “I look around at all of my colleagues and I just have so much respect for all of them. And I look around at all my students and I have so much respect for them. It really does feel like a family. I think there’s just so much support that everybody’s always providing for each other. We’re supporting students, but also our administration supporting teachers, teachers supporting other teachers. Just a sense that we’re all there for each other.”

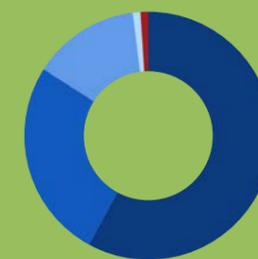
This environment of support and care is foundational to Blackstone, its mission, and its model. Throughout this narrative, we’ll explore the various parts of Blackstone that make it special and effective. We’ll start with the mission.

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BLACKSTONE DEMOGRAPHICS

- 9-12 Grades
- 350 Students
- 29 Teachers
- 14:1 Student-Teacher Ratio
- 81% Free and Reduced Lunch
- Pawtucket, RI



ETHNICITY/RACE	
Hispanic	58%
Black	26%
White	14%
Asian	1%
Two or More Races	1%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	0%

OUR DIVERSITY IS A STRENGTH

" I will say this as this is sort of stereotypical, but it is the truth. We have a lot of kids who are immigrant kids or first generation. And because of that, they feel a lot of responsibility on themselves. You know, they know their parents went through a lot to be here. "

Carolyn Sheehan
Blackstone Executive Director

A Mission That Sticks

The mission of Blackstone is "to build a strong community of learners and leaders." You can read the [full mission statement](#) here. Blackstone wants students to emerge from school with a strong sense of themselves as lifelong learners and a responsibility and investment in the wider world. "When I think of our mission I think of these main things: students, their individuality, and community," says Carolyn.

She continues, "It starts out with this whole thought of a community...with bringing students together so that they can learn about the community on a very micro level, to a very macro level, so that they can contribute to their community no matter where they are."

At Blackstone, students' connection to community begins with their connection to themselves. "[When] you're starting school you're really thinking about yourself and discovering who you are...then you start thinking about yourself in relationship to your family, friends, to people, to Blackstone. And that can mean we're doing a lot of work on how can you be successful in relationships? How can you deal with conflict? How can you manage yourself and others?...Then we look out to the wider world."

Nick Alves, a social studies teacher at Blackstone, reinforces Carolyn's points. "The heart and mission of Blackstone is to foster a strong community of learners and leaders. We want all of our students to get an education, but also learn how to give back to their community and be active members in the community...and we believe that us taking care of our community here at Blackstone is the most important part."

Taking care of each other was a sentiment that rose to the top in dozens of conversations with teachers, parents, students, and staff. Blackstone fosters a feeling of belonging and safety that is fundamental to being able to reach its mission. Just take the story of recent graduate Daniela Carias-Flores and her mother, Yolanis, as an example. When Daniela was a senior she was told she needed emergency open-heart surgery to fix a hole in her heart. Yolanis tears up as she explains how the school stepped in.

"We were low on money and [Blackstone] paid for me and my husband and two daughters to stay at a house next to the hospital. They paid for the whole week." Daniela was in the hospital for her birthday and her whole advisory drove up to celebrate with her. The school made sure she didn't fall behind in classwork, organizing homeschool with three teachers. "They made everything work out for me," says Daniela. "I was able to graduate on time, even with honors." Yolanis says she will never forget it

"Although it sounds corny, we're a family," says Kyleen Carpenter, Blackstone's head of school. Listen to this [podcast](#) to go deeper on Blackstone's mission and hear more about the family atmosphere that makes Blackstone so special.

Why is a coherent mission so important?

Blackstone's mission is the driving force behind the school's culture, curriculum, and programming. Each element moves students closer to their ultimate goal of becoming lifelong learners and leaders. Having a shared mission gives everyone at Blackstone - staff, leaders, students, and families - a north star. It is the foundation for the pedagogy, learning pathways, and experiences in and out of school. It's the mission that the Blackstone family can go back to again and again when making decisions, iterating, and refining the school model.



If you haven't yet, pause and listen to this podcast to go deeper on Blackstone's mission and hear students, faculty, and families reflect on what makes their school so special.

Blackstone's History—A Summer Youth Development Program Blossoms into a School

In the late 90s, Carolyn Sheehan, Kyleen Carpenter, Liz Newton, Stacy Joslin, Doc Augusta, Bob Wooler, and Cynthia Roberts worked together in a summer program called SPIRIT and with a youth guidance program in Rhode Island. The goal of SPIRIT was to expose middle and high school students to new ideas and people, and to explore surrounding communities, all with the purpose of experiencing a different kind of learning. It was a huge success.

The program was voluntary—it wasn't summer school, nobody had to be there—but they were. According to Carolyn, attendance was terrific and students were engaged, which was quite a contrast from the school year when many of these same students were disengaged or left school entirely.

"We were seeing tons of kids that we thought had enormous potential, but instead of doing well in high school, some of them were dropping out," she continues. "And yet those kids were absolutely inspirational during [SPIRIT]."

Liz Newton, one of Blackstone's founders, says the SPIRIT team would sit down together and say to each other, "How can we replicate that success that we have in the summer?" When the law changed to allow charter schools in Rhode Island in 1999, they jumped at the chance to open their own school, and use the building blocks of SPIRIT as its foundation. "I think the success for SPIRIT and SPIRIT students," Liz explains, "was that unique relationship that teachers and mentors had with the students, but also that unique educational model that really got students involved in their communities."

Blackstone still runs the SPIRIT program today. It has served hundreds of youth over the past 30+ years. Read more about [SPIRIT](#) here.

Students call teachers by their first names at Blackstone. It's intentional - to create an atmosphere of closeness and trust, and to break down the barriers that often exist between adults and students. We will be using first names in this story to reflect this important Blackstone tradition.



BLACKSTONE ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL OVERVIEW

About Blackstone Academy Charter School

Blackstone meets its mission of cultivating lifelong learners and leaders who care about their community and know themselves through its school design; how it approaches culture, curriculum, social and emotional learning, and more. The following sections dive into the various elements of Blackstone's model and the Blackstone way.

A Culture Built on Trust

So much of the unique relationship between students and staff at SPIRIT came from a culture of trust, and that has been carried into Blackstone. Trust is one of those invisible, but essential qualities in relationships, families, and organizations that undergirds the experiences of the people in it. Having a high-level of trust—trust between students and teachers, trust between teachers and administrators, trust between families and staff—is part of Blackstone's culture. But how did they cultivate that? What are some of the specific moves? Here's how Blackstone intentionally fosters an atmosphere of trust.

Everyone has a voice—and it's influential.

It's common for schools to say, "Students and teachers have a voice in how the school operates or the experiences they have!" but then there's no example of that happening in the lived experiences of the people involved. At Blackstone that's not the case. Students participate in committees that in other schools might be reserved just for adults. For example, students helped create the Portrait of a Graduate; they are asked each year to review the [school's handbook](#) and revise sections that no longer align to experience. The Black Leadership Initiative, a group of Blackstone students facilitated by a teacher, recently applied for a grant. The students wrote the RFP response themselves to organize the state's first-

ever conference for Rhode Island Black youth. Students can petition for changes to the school and present it to Blackstone's board of directors.

Students also participate in hiring. Kyleen has students interview prospective candidates without her in the room—it's a good way for the candidate to ask frank questions about the school and for the students to connect. "I leave and shut the door and I come back an hour later," says Kyleen. "And I think that part of the interview process is probably one of the most important parts because teenagers can spot a fake a million miles away. And we have taught our kids to connect with adults, that's what the kids are doing or trying to do in the interview. So if they feel they can't make that connection with the adult, then that adult's not going to work out at Blackstone."

Teachers and staff have just as much voice. Blackstone meets weekly as a whole staff and uses consensus decision-making. "We always thought it was so crazy that we [Carolyn and Kyleen] would be responsible for coming up with our whole strategic plan on our own," says Kyleen. "Why would we be the ones who write that? The teachers who are doing the work with the kids need to decide what our plan is." Read how Blackstone defines [consensus decision-making](#).

Carolyn continues, "That stuff, it builds trust because when someone has an individual contribution, or when you bring something to the table you see that we're going to try and see it through. Or if we can't, we're going to entertain a discussion about it at some point."

Blackstone is a smaller school, but Carolyn presses that this style of leading can work in any environment, not just small schools. "Folks

don't always think that it's possible in a bigger system, but you can do it in your units or your departments or your teams. You model it and it spreads, no matter what size your school or district is. It's a way of thinking."

We entrust you.

From a leadership standpoint, Kyleen and Carolyn are explicit in telling their staff that they trust them. As Kyleen says, "I let our incoming teachers know from the get go that they were hired for very specific reasons and that they are entrusted by being hired at Blackstone." And she remembers when a new teacher asked where she should submit lesson plans. Kyleen laughed, "Lesson plans! I would love to see them, but I don't need to see them. I trust you." It's these kinds of small conversations that make a big impact. When the school first started, Kyleen would attend grade-level meetings, but she realized the grade level deans can manage that on their own and that by handing that responsibility off it was demonstrating the trust she had in their skills. Micromanaging is a surefire way to erode trust, so Kyleen and Carolyn work hard to avoid it.

We welcome all of who you are.

When hiring, Kyleen looks for people who are multidimensional. Staff don't have strict job descriptions, they are expected to play multiple roles (which we'll get into more later), so finding people with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences is a high priority. But then once they are hired, Blackstone makes sure to emphasize how much they welcome the whole person. "During the orientation period we really pay attention to what that person brings to the table and ask them, how do you want to be able to do that? So no matter what the position was you were hired for, what else? What else are you about? What else are you interested in focusing on?" explains Carolyn. She continues, "Then we

talk to them about how we think that could fit in and how what they bring will be valued here and we'll build on it...As soon as people come to us, we want them to feel welcome and supported to bring themselves as a whole person."

This comfort and openness in bringing one's whole self and embracing others' whole selves is an essential element for the strong relationships that staff and students build. This whole-self culture requires vulnerability and builds trust, understanding, and a depth of connection. [Listen to this clip](#) of student Yennifer Rivas Paulino sharing the trust she felt when her teacher came out as transgender to her and her classmates; an example of someone sharing their truest self with their school community.

Some adults might be concerned about whether being open and sharing with students might dissolve boundaries—and whether things might become inappropriate. But at Blackstone these moments of vulnerability are where trust is built. "I think that a teacher will share about themselves because they trust that the kids are not going to act inappropriately on that information," says Kyleen. "So I'm going to reveal this big part of me because I trust that you're going to be okay with it and you're going to respect me still and we're still going to be okay."

Comfort with mistakes.

Trust is also built in the response to mistakes. Students, staff, and leadership trust that they will be supported, not ridiculed or penalized, when they make mistakes. Within this culture there's an acknowledgement that we all make mistakes, and mistakes are part of the learning process. In order to grow together and individually, the mistakes we make should be seen as opportunities to grow. [Listen to Kyleen](#) talk about how she has handled apologies and mistakes.

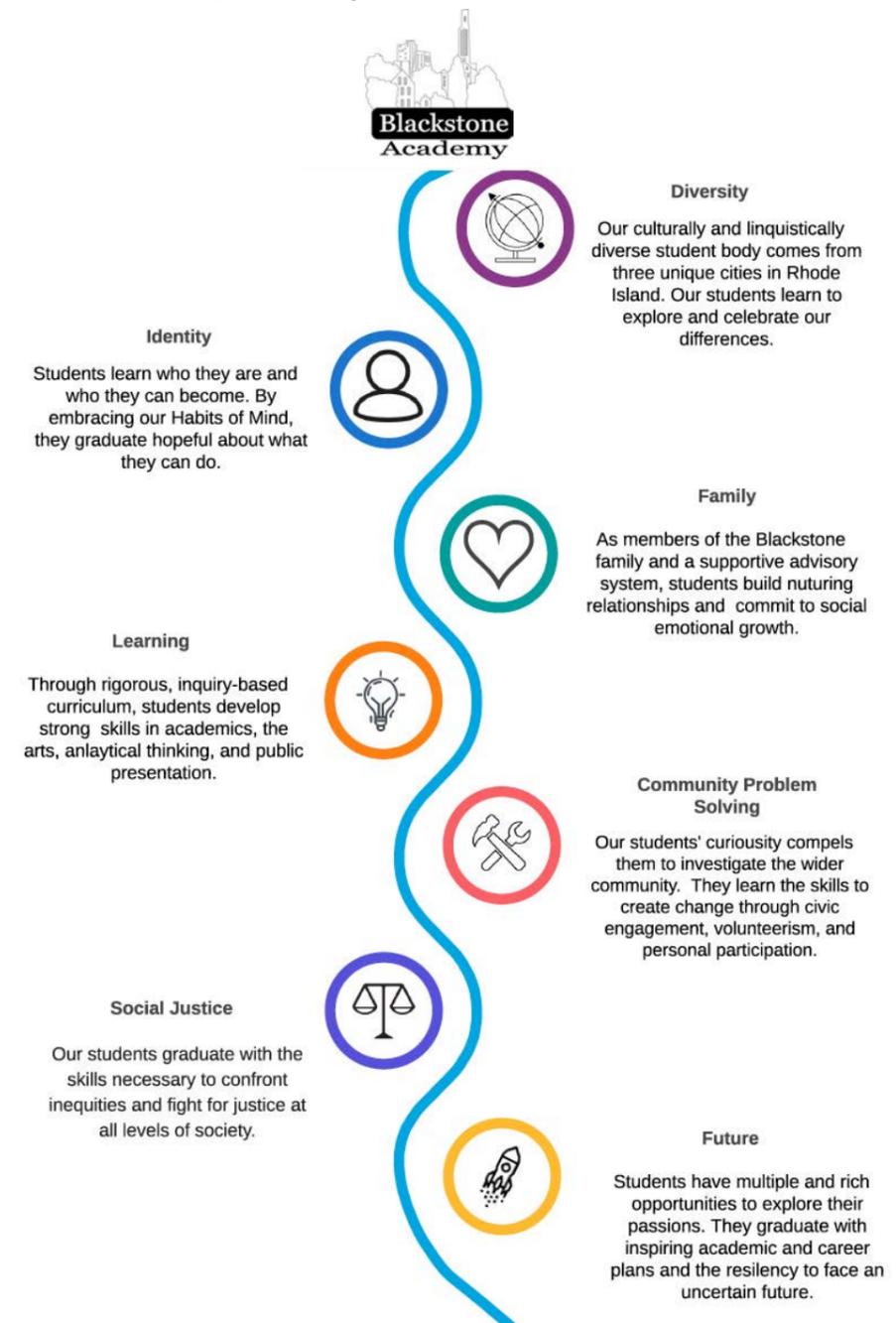
Portrait of a Graduate

The learning that students experience within this culture of trust is encapsulated in the school's Portrait of a Graduate. The Portrait of a Graduate document reflects the habits, skills, and dispositions that all Blackstone's students will demonstrate. Blackstone began working with the Barr Foundation to design their portrait. But the final one-page document doesn't reflect anything new. It already existed, and the Portrait of a Graduate now articulates the full experience in a way that they had not had before.

Kyleen and Carolyn don't expect their staff or students to memorize this Portrait of a Graduate, that's not how they do things at Blackstone. They live the portrait through how

Blackstone fosters culture, builds relationships, supports students, and intentionally designs learning experiences. Without that, the Portrait of a Graduate becomes just words on a page.

The Blackstone way—every choice and action that the Blackstone community makes matters. The smallest daily interaction. The way the staff engage with families and students as members of the community. Whose voices are at the table to make decisions. Throughout this piece, discover how each element of the school's model is an example of how Blackstone lives the portrait.





HABITS OF MIND

Blackstone Academy Charter School

Social and Emotional Learning Takes a Front Seat

It's no surprise that a school that emphasizes trust and relationships also puts a great deal of effort into social and emotional learning. Blackstone believes social and emotional development is a fundamental part to being lifelong learners who have lasting relationships, support their communities, and know themselves. The way it manifests—the how they approach it—is through the school's Habits of Mind.

The 13 habits encompass what Blackstone considers to be key qualities of successful people. They make up the fabric, the essence, of what teachers and staff want to help young people cultivate. They provide students with tangible ways to improve and think about their mindsets, patterns, and behaviors.

As Kyleen describes, "We wrote the Habits of Mind many, many years ago now. And we wordsmithed every word in those. And we want to make sure that our kids understand those. We talk about them. They're all over the school. We ask students to identify them. And every year we ask the students to reflect on them in their portfolio."

"No one's perfect at all of them or even good at all of them," says Kyleen. "So annually, we let

our students identify the ones that they might already be great at or the ones that might already come easily to them. And they also have to identify ones that they are looking to grow in. And maybe an instance where they lacked it completely."

Sometimes in schools, elements like Habits of Mind might be referenced by the adults, but it doesn't trickle down to the lived experiences of students. That's not the case at Blackstone. Students and staff talk regularly about the Habits of Mind together, especially in advisory, and teachers bring it into class work and learning experiences. Brittany Ortiz, a first generation college student who graduated from Blackstone in 2013, credits the school for helping her develop her voice with habits like self-advocacy.

"They were able to teach us, you know, proper ways to communicate with people and understanding that level of communication and how important it is.... So freshman year, and then growing into senior year, I was shy, like tenth grade, and just wouldn't talk. And Kyleen was my advisor, and she would say, you have to talk! You have such a powerful voice."

Scott Seider, a professor at Boston College and co-author of *Schooling for Critical Consciousness*, a book featuring Blackstone, agrees: Habits of Mind are essential to Blackstone. "Things go in cycles. And so now there's this new emphasis, within education, on what people are calling 'deeper learning' and in some ways I think that's bringing back this interest in inquiry and habits of mind. Blackstone's been doing this for 20 years."

The deeper learning and self-awareness that the Habits of Mind encourage in students is supported in Blackstone's core classes and also through advisory. The next section will describe the advisory system at Blackstone and the large role it plays in students' experiences.

How Portrait of a Graduate, Habits of Mind, and Mission Intersect

Blackstone's Portrait of a Graduate and Habits of Mind are a roadmap towards Blackstone's mission of creating lifelong learners and leaders. Habits of Mind describe in detail the qualities and mindsets of a learner. The Portrait of a Graduate unpacks the journey students are on - from beginning of their career at Blackstone to the end - and the learning expectations and competencies they will develop along the way. Both the Habits of Mind and Portrait of a Graduate are not standalone assets, but fundamental to the living, breathing experiences of learners as they achieve the school's mission to live a life of learning, leadership, and community impact.



Advisory - The Family Within a Family

At the beginning of freshman year, students are paired with an advisor and a small group of peers, about 10-13 students total. This advisory becomes their own small family. They meet every morning for “community meeting” and each afternoon. The advisory system is core to Blackstone.

As freshmen, advisory first focuses on helping students get to know themselves better as individuals, explains the science teacher, Brianna; “It’s a lot of identity work.” Then, the work begins to look outward. “They start looking at themselves in relation to the community and they start to get involved in the community. As ninth and tenth graders that manifests as job shadowing and some volunteering; in junior year students do a service learning project of their choosing. Senior year they do a big senior project, which we’ll explain in more detail later in the piece.

At the start of school, alum Brittany wasn’t convinced advisory was all that helpful, and initially resented it. “This is a small school. The advisory..we’re stuck with each other for four years. And you’re with them three times a day! You were seeing the same people all day, the same teachers. Oh, I was going crazy.” But by senior year, Brittany said advisory had changed her life for the better. She deeply appreciated the relationships she developed through advisory:

“Kyleen [my advisor] pushed me so much. I felt like the school believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. And as a student being first-generation, you know, growing up in an urban neighborhood, having these teachers really believe in me is what pushed me to go to college, get my master’s, and get a good job. And if it wasn’t for the culture at Blackstone, I just don’t think that I would be where I’m at today.”

Senior Yennifer feels similarly. “I love my advisory. I love the people in my advisory and I specifically really love my advisor. She’s just so supportive. No matter what you do, she supports you...and advisory has really helped me, especially with my mental health.”

During one point of school, Yennifer was really struggling mentally. It was her advisor who helped her emerge from it, urging Yennifer to put herself first. Yennifer explains, “[She said] ‘Don’t even worry about your grades because your mental health is something you need to work on first, your health, you come first before your grades, before school! That was something I really needed to hear. Like I really needed it at that time. Just someone to tell you, focus on yourself, work on yourself. ‘Cause I was focused on everything else other than me.’”

Scott says that many schools have advisory, but it might just be five minutes in the morning or once or twice a week they get together. At Blackstone, “they commit to it in a way like almost no other school does.”

Blackstone builds advisory to model a family unit. The advisory eats together in the morning. They can use the school vans when they want to get out into the community to do something like go for ice cream or take a walk in the afternoons. “From the very first day of school here is a group of people that you are going to know intimately,” says Scott. “And I think that’s very powerful.”

Science teacher Brianna says advisory is fundamental to the positive culture of Blackstone. “I get to know [my advisory] really well over the course of those four years, and they get to know each other really well. That really does become the center of support both

from the teacher perspective and the student perspective. Students are supported by their peers in advisory and they are supported by their advisor.”

Advisors are expected to be their students’ point person. “I’m there to point them in whatever direction they need,” says Brianna. “If they need certain social, emotional support maybe I can provide that or maybe I direct them to one of our student support staff or social workers. If they are having trouble with one of our classes, maybe I set up a meeting with that teacher and student.”

It’s easy in a high school especially to get lost in the crowd. Having a mechanism like advisory built into the system ensures nobody slips through.

The Ins & Outs of Advisory

Pre-COVID schedule

Advisory meets twice daily—for a 15-minute morning check-in and then for 30 minutes in the afternoon. There are 29 advisories at the school. Two to three times per month advisories meet on a Wednesday afternoon for one hour and 45 minutes. Some of this time may include an all-grade or all-school activity, other times advisories might choose to leave campus for a hike, to visit a business in the city, or for another activity. The school has vans that the advisories can check out.

The goals of advisory

The advisors’ goal is to support students/families through their high school journey: academically, socially, and through the higher education process. In advisory, students learn how to be a productive member of a group, how to support each other, celebrate each other, work through conflict, and have fun.

How they support staff to be strong advisors.

The role of the advisor is made explicit at the hiring process. The teachers who choose to work at Blackstone are consciously seeking out this experience to connect with students and families in a deeper way. They are supported by (1) receiving an orientation to the goals of advisory; (2) getting an advisory binder full of ideas; and (3) meetings every six weeks or so with the other advisors at their same grade level to agree on common tasks and troubleshoot any issues. All full-time Blackstone staff are expected to have an advisory, not just teachers.

Additional Resources

[Sample Advisory Year By Year](#)

[Advisory Best Practice](#)

Robust Student Support Team

In addition to advisory, an exceptional part of Blackstone is its large student support team made up of social workers, licensed professional counselors, and psychologists. There are eight people on the team, and that number can jump even higher with social work interns who regularly work at Blackstone. The student support team meets weekly to discuss student cases, and students who need it can meet with a member of the team for support.

This support can manifest in a few ways, depending on the student’s needs. The student support staff helps address academic challenges with students (if a student needs that) along with social and emotional learning. A support staff member can mentor a student, provide short-term support, or have short check-ins. The student support team “tries to identify needs and develop a plan for students that meets that student’s needs with a focus on what can help them be a happy and more successfully functioning student at Blackstone,” says Carolyn. “Traditional counseling is only part of the services offered.” If a student needs even more specific support, the team will connect them and their family to outside agencies.

It’s unique for a high school to pay so much attention and care to students’ mental health—and invest in so many staff positions. But it was

always part of the vision of Blackstone. “If you work at Blackstone you’re expected to be talking to kids regularly about wellness and social emotional learning,” says Carolyn.

Another function of the student support team is to help create systems, activities, and knowledge school-wide that promote healthy behaviors and strategies for students and staff. This includes lesson planning for advisory meetings, professional development for staff, and informational sessions for students and families. The full-time members of the team are advisors as well. Finally, this team connects social and emotional learning to the activities Blackstone does as a school.

Sheryl Kopel, a parent of one current and one former Blackstone student, says that she feels the support students get at Blackstone is unique and also vital to their development. She explains, “I really believe that while young adults, teenagers, and burgeoning adults need room to make their own decisions and their own mistakes, they need to be surrounded by adults who are custodians. I feel that at Blackstone Academy, there’s a very strong feeling that the adults in the building are custodians and that the older students are encouraged to be, you know, sort of peer mentors of the younger students. That’s just an incredible thing.”



Support Staff



1 full time
clinical social worker/
advisor



1 full time
mental health counselor/
advisor



1 full time
wellness coordinator/
advisor/EMT

The above staff members each follow a grade of students and collaborate with the Dean of a grade and teaching teams on students. They also each have an advisory of 10-13 students.

The team also includes:



1 full-time school climate coordinator
coordinates discipline, helps with restorative justice
and general student/teacher relations, background in
community-based prevention education



The Special Education Director
sometimes other members of support staff such as a
teaching assistant or behavior specialist



.30 clinical social worker
to focus on students with counseling on their IEP



3-5 BSW and MSW interns
mainly from Rhode Island College



.25 consulting Phd clinical psychologist
who does evaluations and gives support on most
challenging cases



.30 MSW Phd in social work
she coordinates the team meetings, plans long term
and school wide strategy for the team and sets up
evaluative measures for the process

There will be a podcast on Blackstone's student supports coming soon!



INSTRUCTIONAL VISION

Core Courses

Students' core academic classes are broken into blocks and follow an inquiry-based model. Most teachers use project-based learning as their pedagogy of choice. Take a look at the Blackstone schedule and a [list of all courses](#) available right now.

Public Presentations & Portfolio

Cultivating student voice and being able to use that voice is another key part of Blackstone's model. Students are asked to give public presentations regularly. "For us, public presentation is a skill that we intentionally develop in our students," says Kyleen.

"I had to do so many presentations in front of the whole school, in front of like the seniors," says Yennifer, reflecting on her earlier years at Blackstone. "It was terrible. But, they talked about how it's going to benefit you in the future to do this. Even if you hate it right now, it's going to benefit you in the future. And when I was a freshman, I was like, 'That's a lie. I'm going to hate it in the future too.' And then now I'm here as a senior, I'm like, 'That really did benefit me in the future.' Now I don't get scared at all to present... I don't get nervous really at all, talking in front of people. It just doesn't scare me."

Yennifer used these public speaking skills recently in response to George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter movement; she [recorded a response](#) and then performed it live in front of her entire school.

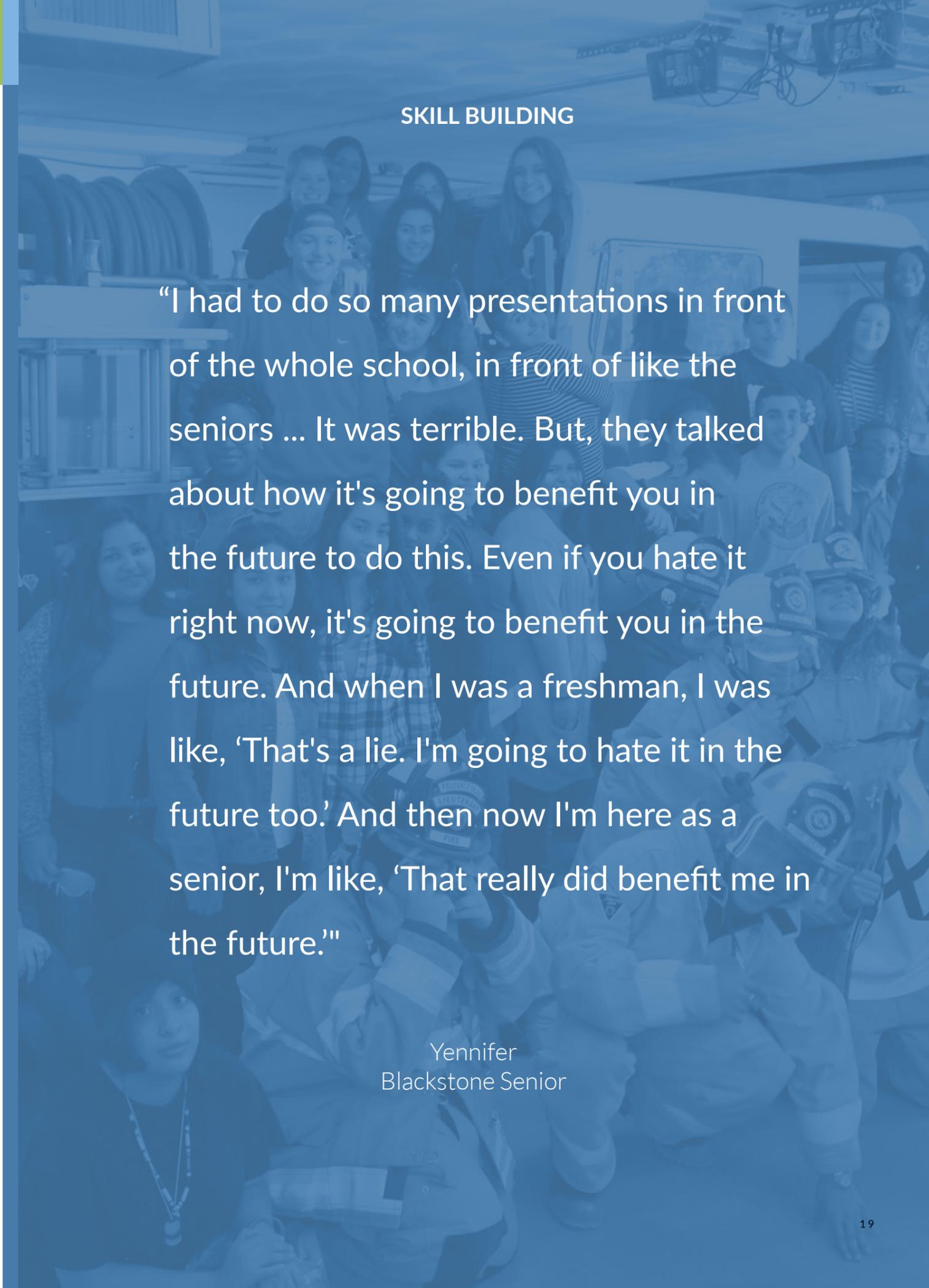
How does Blackstone intentionally develop public speaking? Kyleen explains a few ways that it's built into the curriculum. The first is through

advisory. When school happens in-person, the day begins with a community meeting (right now while it's virtual, community meeting is in the afternoon). Each advisory is responsible for running this meeting—as opposed to an adult facilitating it. Each advisory is assigned at least one week of the school year to do it. "The kids are up at the morning community meeting with the microphone running it," says Kyleen. For example, the advisory running the meeting this fall decided to call October, "Optimistic October," and did a presentation on the Habits of Mind of optimism and gratitude.

Group work happens regularly in classes, so public presentation also regularly happens there. The other big place where public speaking is built in is portfolio. Integral to Blackstone's graduation requirements is a rigorous portfolio system for all students.

"Portfolios are compilations of specific student work that comes from both coursework and outside experiences, such as a job shadow or a service-learning project. The portfolio is an opportunity for students to demonstrate how much they've learned during their school year as well as how much they've grown," the website explains.

SKILL BUILDING



"I had to do so many presentations in front of the whole school, in front of like the seniors ... It was terrible. But, they talked about how it's going to benefit you in the future to do this. Even if you hate it right now, it's going to benefit you in the future. And when I was a freshman, I was like, 'That's a lie. I'm going to hate it in the future too.' And then now I'm here as a senior, I'm like, 'That really did benefit me in the future.'"

Yennifer
Blackstone Senior

"It's basically a compendium of the student's work over the course of the year," says Kyleen. Students curate their portfolio with a collection of proficient work from class, advisory pieces, college and career exploration, an updated resume, an about me page, and then there are different requirements by grade level. Students work on their portfolios throughout the year, usually in advisory, explains student Bernice, and then they have to present it to a panel.

"We always start with our portfolio [in advisory] because we'll have to present a portfolio of works that you have achieved, works you're proud of from the whole year," says Bernice. Students present the portfolio in front of their advisor, a teacher, and another staff member. They have the option to also present it to their peers in advisory.

"You are offered the option of presenting in front of your advisory if you want. Usually everybody feels comfortable presenting in front of them because you guys have been together already for the whole entire year or year after year. So you're already comfortable with each other." You can invite your family to the portfolio presentations, as well. It's a big deal, says Kyleen. Portfolio presentations are the most important assessment of the year—and the development and organization that goes into it is a learning experience in and of itself.

The portfolio is essentially a long-term project that requires lots of steps. Liz, a founding teacher, shares the story of one of her students, who was in her advisory, who struggled with it. "One of my students, he just had a very difficult time keeping up with all the assignments that were due, all the projects within a project that was due. All the paperwork that he had in his backpack was just coming out all over the place. And so what I focused on with him, was to be able to understand his strengths and understand what he needed to work on, but also to be an advocate for himself

that he needed to be able to go to his teachers, for instance, his English teacher, and say, projects are really difficult for me."

Liz describes the process at Blackstone as being one where the student works with a team—his teachers, his advisor, and his family—to find the right learning plan for that student, whether it's regarding the portfolio or a specific class.

"What we really focus on at Blackstone is coming up with that individual learning plan and also the advisor/advisee relationship," says Liz. "I had José do some profiling of himself academically, also had his parents do some profiling of José as a student and as a child, as a son, and then had his teachers do some profiling of José and who he was as a student. And so it's not saying that the teachers always had to change their teaching for him, but that he needed it to be a partnership. He really needed to step up and know that throughout life he's going to have to do this, you know."

José graduated from Blackstone and went into the military for a short period of time to help pay for college. "And then he ended up getting accepted to RISD and graduated from what else? A school of design!" Liz says the portfolio process and learning how to organize and present your work is an important life skill. "What are the knowledge and the skills that I need to be able to show what we do, that I passed this project? And then is there any way that I can then change how I can show you that information?"

In the spring of 2020, when school had to quickly pivot to virtual learning because of the pandemic, these portfolio presentations moved to virtual, like everything else.

Beyond the portfolio, senior project, which we'll explain in more detail below, is a huge part of senior year and often requires some public speaking as well. During her senior year, Brittany

had to present on her senior project to the whole school, something she was terrified to do. She was so nervous and didn't want to do it, but she had to make an announcement about her project because she needed students to sign up for her cooking classes, which was part of her project.

"I needed kids to participate in a cooking class that I was offering after school. So I obviously needed to advertise that. And so I had to present it in front of the whole school. My nerves were crazy, but I got a full class, which is good," explains Brittany. "They always pushed me to, to the very end, always while holding my hand which is good. But then sometimes they would let my hand go and they were like, Britt. Like you gotta fly. Cause once you leave, like we can't hold your hand anymore. And so by senior year, after presenting in front of everybody, I was like, wow, I can do that. I can, I can do it again. It's okay. Like my nerves didn't get the best of me at that moment." The public speaking requirements enabled Brittany to develop the confidence in herself and learn a skill that would serve her well in her career.



Portfolio Requirements

Students' portfolios are curated collections of their work throughout the year. Here is what's included in the portfolio:

- One piece of graded Learning Evidence per semester per class
- EOC Reflections for all classes
- Resume
- Habits of Mind Reflections
- Updated ILP
- Read-On Summaries
- Morning Meeting
- Facing History Evidence
- Summer Learning Plan

Each year there are other specific grade-level requirements to be completed as well, such as a learning styles survey in ninth grade, two college visits in tenth and eleventh grades, and 20 hours of both service-learning and an internship by their senior year.

Here's an example of a former student [Thania's portfolio](#).

[This document](#) describes the External Learning Skills that 10th and 11th graders particularly need to show progress on as they build their portfolios and complete their grade specific tasks like volunteering, completing a job shadow or internship, and service learning projects.

[Virtual 11th grade external learning](#) is a document given to 11th graders to help them complete their advisory specific tasks and documentation after we went out on distance learning. This included their volunteering requirement, their career related requirements etc. and there are lots of links to other documents and websites to help them as they build their portfolio.

[External Learning Skills Checklist](#) is a tool for students to use to document their External Learning Skills in their portfolio.



Community Improvement Projects

Another key element of the academic experience at Blackstone is learning outside the classroom and serving the community. Kyleen says that learning is not confined to the walls of a building. This mindset goes back to the genesis of Blackstone, back when it started as SPIRIT. Getting out into the world and exposing young people to new ideas, people, and places is part of the high school's ethos.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, core academic classes end early and students spend the afternoons in their Community Improvement Projects, called CIPs. These are projects of their choosing, facilitated by Blackstone staff and in partnership with community agencies. Students learn how to analyze issues in their community and work to improve them. (Once agencies reopen and field trips are permitted, students will travel off campus to visit these places.)

CIPs were envisioned as a place where students could practice the skills and knowledge they would need in order to be effective in their junior year service-learning projects and their independent senior projects. The goal is that students gain skills from experiences like meeting and communicating with people from the outside world, writing letters and emailing, planning events, or putting together a performance or activity for others. Doing these things in the safety of a group setting helps students build the skills and experiences they will need to have when they attempt independent projects.

CIPs also help instill a sense of social responsibility and social justice and of being politically active. "It's always there," says Yennifer, about this connection to the larger world. "It's just always dropped into your day to day. And every morning meeting, they bring up things in the world."

According to Scott Seider, CIPs play an important role in fostering a feeling of connection to one's community and that's something Blackstone takes to heart. Learning in the classroom is just as much a part of the curriculum as learning out of the classroom.

"I think it's pretty important in terms of fostering a sense of purpose...helping young people think about the 'Why.' Why are we doing all this? What's the purpose of these academic skills I'm developing?" says Scott. It also gives students a chance to connect with another adult who might not be a teacher.

Brittany, as a first generation American whose family immigrated from Colombia, says that one of the most memorable CIPs she did was in an immigration class. "We ended up writing a book in the class and we printed it and the book was published. It had a story of each of us. Each of us had to interview a person who immigrated into the country. The book was about...what they do now and their impact in the community." Brittany decided to interview her mom. Her teacher, whose wife was a photographer, took portraits of everyone who was featured. The final goal of the CIP was a published book. "So we had deadlines that we had to meet, all the time, and the teacher, she was like, kind of get on it, get on it. That was one of my favorite CIP classes—the fact that I was part of a book, like the process of writing a book. And then just seeing like the stories and you couldn't just imagine like, you know, one person's struggle is completely different than another person's struggle. It was a book all to highlight the success that these parents or family members or friends did to ultimately come to this country."

Key Resources for CIPs

Here's a list of 2020-21 [Community Improvement Projects](#). Some sample descriptions are pulled out below.

All teachers run a CIP and the ideas for topics come from their own interests. For example, Brianna, a science teacher, is running a CIP on education and how to become a teacher. Her hope with the CIP is to introduce people to the experience of teaching while also disrupting the pipeline and bringing more students of color into a career that is still mostly White women.

CIP: Candid X-Posure

In this CIP we will be using photography and videography as a catalyst to see our community and world through a new lens. Through the use of photography and social media we will share stories, report on what is happening and engage with our communities. A focus of this CIP will be on the Black Lives Matter movement and how student advocacy can support BLM.

CIP: Literacy Leaders

Remember reading stories as a little kid? Well, little kids very close by need "big kids" to read them stories! Students in this class will work with elementary students from International Charter School next door to help them understand the importance of reading. The BACS students will learn how to teach reading to young children in English, Spanish, and Portuguese (so this CIP needs bilingual Blackstone students!) Weekly visits to ICS will be interwoven with some reflection and writing.

Additional Resources

[CIP Community Engagement Rubric](#)

[End of Course Rubric](#)

CIP: Born to Run: BACS 5k Planning Team

Have you ever wanted to start running and get in shape, but are not sure where to begin? Are you looking for a way to condition for your favorite sport without getting hurt? Have you been looking for a unique project to put on your college resume, while at the same time helping out your own school community? In this CIP, students will dive into the world of running, and will learn how to properly run and put together a routine while learning strategies to keep from getting injured. The final culminating project will be embedded into preparing and organizing the BACs annual 5k road race. Students will prepare for this project by first analyzing the mental and physical aspects of running. These concepts will be conveyed through a book study, outside sources, and by creating and trying out some running/walking workouts themselves.

CIP: Gettin' Wild with Roger Williams Zoo

Why do we keep animals in zoos? What and how can we learn about the animals we see at the zoo? What do zoos contribute to the scientific and urban community? In this class, we will explore the benefits and drawbacks of keeping animals in captivity. We will conduct our own research at Roger Williams Park Zoo and learn how to use that data to understand captive animal behavior. This research will help inform our own decisions on the morality of zoos and allow us to brainstorm concrete changes that can be made to increase animal well-being and the zoo's impact on the community. We will also spend time learning about the citizen science and local conservation projects the zoo is involved in. The class will have a strong focus on developing research skills. We will keep a field journal, gather data, analyze it to answer essential questions, and communicate our findings with a variety of audiences.

Junior Year Service Learning

Blackstone students are typically introduced to the concept of service-learning through their CIPs and as part of a tenth grade interdisciplinary project in their classes. By eleventh grade, they're ready to create and complete their own service-learning projects. Students put together a project by deciding what problem they want to solve.

"You get to pick your topic and you focus on it for the whole year," explains Bernice. She decided to do a project where she knit hats for premature babies, with the goal to share them with mothers and children in need. "I was interested in it because my little nephew was born premature and it's also a topic that a lot of people don't know a lot about." Students have the opportunity to work with other students or on their own. Their

advisors coach them, and Rhonda Hanaway, the career advisor, Carolyn, and other adults help them with outside connections as needed.

Key Resources for Service-Learning

[11th Grade Service-Learning Presentation](#)

[Quick Steps for Service-Learning Projects](#)



Senior Project

A big culminating experience for Blackstone students is the senior project. It's a year-long project that pulls together the skills and knowledge they have gathered throughout the four years. Each senior spends their year researching a problem in the community they would like to solve, explains Senior Seminar teachers Stacy Joslin and Tasche Bryant. "Using their community engagement skills, students reach out to local organizations to get real-world insight into the problem. Combined with academic research, students use this knowledge to write papers which explore the problem, the people affected, and the viability of various solutions. Students then propose and implement a project in the community and gather data to explore the effectiveness of their solution. Students explain their year-long work in a formal presentation as the final graduation requirement."

"I love the senior project," says Kyleen. "The kids complain about it, but it really is pretty amazing." Students pick any topic they want to focus on and have to do a research project.

"God, I have so many examples of senior projects," Kyleen recounts, smiling. "I remember several years ago we had a student who was bilingual and his senior project was that he did a research study on the importance of bilingualism. And then he volunteered at a local agency teaching Spanish-speaking adults in GED math classes. It was amazing. And he was only supposed to do 20 hours and he had like 150 hours."

Key Resources for Senior Projects

[Senior Year Project Example](#)



COVID-Context Considerations: Distance Learning Schedule

Distance Learning Schedule

Quarter 1 | 2020-2021
September 14 - November 13

Monday Flex Day	Tuesday A Day	Wednesday B Day	Thursday A Day	Friday B Day	
During Flex Days:	8:00 - 8:30	PREP & Advisory Attendance			
BACS Staff Meetings 9-11am	8:30 - 10:00	Block A	Block C	Block A	Block C
Enrichment Support	10:00 - 10:30	PREP			
Project/Work					
Teacher Collaboration	10:30 - 12:00	Block B	Block D	Block B	Block D
Student Check-ins					
Advisory Check-in	12:00 - 1:10	LUNCH / Advisory / Community Meeting			
Team Meetings					
Parent/Family Communication	1:15 - 2:45	CIP / Long Block 1	Block E	CIP / Long Block 2	Block E

Highlights:

Fewer classes each day with fewer transitions.

More time in class to transition from full class to group / individual work time.

Transition and prep times mean that students and teachers don't have to rush to the next class.

This will be the schedule only while we are (mostly) distance learning.

Community Meeting moved to PM Advisory.

College & Career Preparation

Blackstone has a 94 percent graduation rate, 10 percentage points higher compared with Rhode Island's graduation rate, which in 2017 was 84.1 percent, according to the Rhode Island Department of Education.

"Every student who graduates will have applied to a college and will have figured out what they want to do when they graduate," says Liz, the founding teacher and board member. Carolyn remembers the college process from when she was a teenager and how daunting it was, even with support. She wanted to bridge the gap for Blackstone students.

"I remember applying to college and my mom setting up a typewriter at the time—that's how old I am—and her helping me with my essays and application and really giving me a lot of help. And I had three older siblings. And so in the basement of our house, there was this big, huge college catalog." Carolyn always thinks about her mom and how instrumental she was to her college process. Blackstone provides the same for their students.

"Most of our students are going to be either the first generation going to college in this country or [to higher ed] at all." Many parents of Blackstone children have not had the experience of applying to or completing college, so Blackstone makes it a purpose to support students and families every step of the way.

The core way they support students in the college process is through Senior Seminar, a class all seniors take that is focused on their future. Students do their college application in class. They organize their recommendations. They write their essays.

Blackstone also has college visits a few times a month on the weekend. They pack kids in the van and off they go and see them together. Carolyn, Diego (a teacher), and a guidance counselor help families fill out FAFSA forms; the parents come in and they do it together. They regularly make presentations to families about college and they organize students taking their SATs. And college is also spoken about and celebrated regularly during morning community meeting, explains Liz. "So they see it right at the beginning."

One of the most helpful and powerful practices for preparing students for college at Blackstone is watching the seniors go through the process in a real and transparent way, says Brittany. She remembers watching the seniors be accepted to college and how memorable and special it was.

"During those morning meetings, one thing that I would always remember is they would acknowledge college acceptances," she recalls. "So as a sophomore or a freshman or a junior, you're hearing all of these seniors get accepted to this, getting accepted to that. And in the hallway, they would post your application that you got accepted to. So it was highlighting your success. And so you are constantly getting recognized for those many accomplishments. And so you, you know, as a tenth grader, I would see that. And I'm like, 'Wow..that's so cool. They got a full ride there!' So then by the time you're a senior, you're like, 'Ooh, when you're walking down the hallway and you see your name and, and your picture, you want to make sure you have a lot of college acceptances on right under your face!'"

"So it was something that they definitely pushed," continues Brittany. "They definitely always wanted us to aim high and never doubt ourselves.. because most of us were first-generation college

students. So it was all new to all of us. My mom did not know how to help me apply to college. She didn't know I needed to take SATs. Like these were all key things that Blackstone did for us, helped us navigate us through the whole college process, and is what helped me and my family and my cousins and my classmates. Like they were there to literally hold our hand and guide us every step of the way and things that our parents didn't know how to do, let alone, like they didn't know about SATs, college essays, senior paper, they didn't know none of it. And so it was great that they were there to help us with that and, and, and really navigate us."

Rather than an obsession about getting into the right college, parent Sheryl appreciates instead how Blackstone teaches students to see college as a tool. "The fact that Blackstone has this emphasis on preparing for college and visiting colleges and thinking about it and talking about it from freshman year is very attractive. There's not an obsession with getting into the right colleges or the elite colleges; it's about, there's a recognition that college is a tool to get you somewhere, to get you a career or to afford you the opportunity to learn about different things."

Quick Facts—How Blackstone Helps Students with College

College visits

College visits were something Blackstone always did during the school year with SPIRIT students so they knew they had to build it into the school plan as well. At least twice a month and usually on a Saturday, students can travel with the school to tour colleges. "Usually, there are two different excursions per Saturday and students sign up in advance," says Carolyn. "We also visit colleges on school vacation weeks. Each year, students have an opportunity to visit at least 20 colleges in the region, most are within an hour of Blackstone so Rhode Island, Boston, Boston suburbs, and Worcester. On occasion, we take students on specialized visits like the five colleges in the Amherst, Massachusetts area, women's colleges, etc. Advisories and sometimes classes take students to local colleges with a purpose like using the science labs at Providence College, visiting the RISD Museum, using a Brown University building for an event, or going to Roger Williams University to a conference."

Senior Seminar

All seniors take this course dedicated to post-graduation plans. Students fill out college applications. They write their essays. They organize and request recommendations.

Financial aid

Families come to school and the Blackstone team fills out the FAFSA application with them, step by step. They do this over the course of several months until they are complete.

Cultivating a culture where college is celebrated and expected

Morning meetings are filled with seniors' plans. Students from freshman year hear about where students are going after they graduate and what they plan to do.

Key Resources for College & Career

[Higher education presentation to families](#); since many families do not speak English as a first language, Blackstone offers [Spanish speaking presentations](#) as well.

[College Visit reflection](#)

Blackstone is an incredibly special place. Continue your exploration of the school through these resources.

[Visit Blackstone's website](#) to learn more about the school.

[Follow Blackstone's Facebook page](#), which is updated regularly.

[Explore Blackstone's YouTube channel](#) for recordings of school events, meetings, and conversations.

PHOTO BY ELIANIS CRUZ, BLACKSTONE '21

BLACKSTONE ACADEMY
CHARTER SCHOOL:
MODEL OVERVIEW
NOVEMBER 2020

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gather&create

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