



# FROM INQUIRY TO ACTION

Blackstone Academy Charter School's Approach to Academics

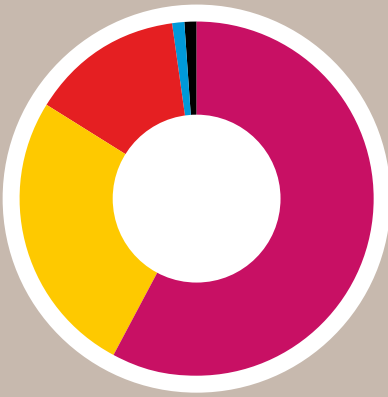


AUG  
2021



BLACKSTONE DEMOGRAPHICS

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



HISPANIC	58%
BLACK	26%
WHITE	14%
ASIAN	1%
TWO OR MORE RACES	1%
AMERICAN INDIAN/ ALASKAN NATIVE	0%
HAWAIIAN NATIVE/ PACIFIC ISLANDER	0%

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“I took an introduction to nonprofits course my freshman year. It was taught by Chanda [Womack], executive director of a youth-based nonprofit called ARISE [Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education], which was amazing. Throughout the year we learned what a nonprofit is and what goes into creating our own—budgeting, planning, mission, vision, goals, what values represent your nonprofit, and what it takes to keep it sustainable. Then we had to take what we learned and go. Our group made a nonprofit focused on clean water called H2O, which is an acronym for Heart 2 Ocean.

Making a nonprofit is not easy. I spent a lot of time working outside of class and coordinating with my team. We talked a lot about budgeting because you have to have a stable source of income and figure out where it should go—like how much we want to pay the people involved. We also looked at actual grants Chanda shared. I put together a website as the most practical way to organize all the parts, such as the organizational budget, strategic plan, mission, and values. I wanted it to look presentable and be something I could be proud of.”

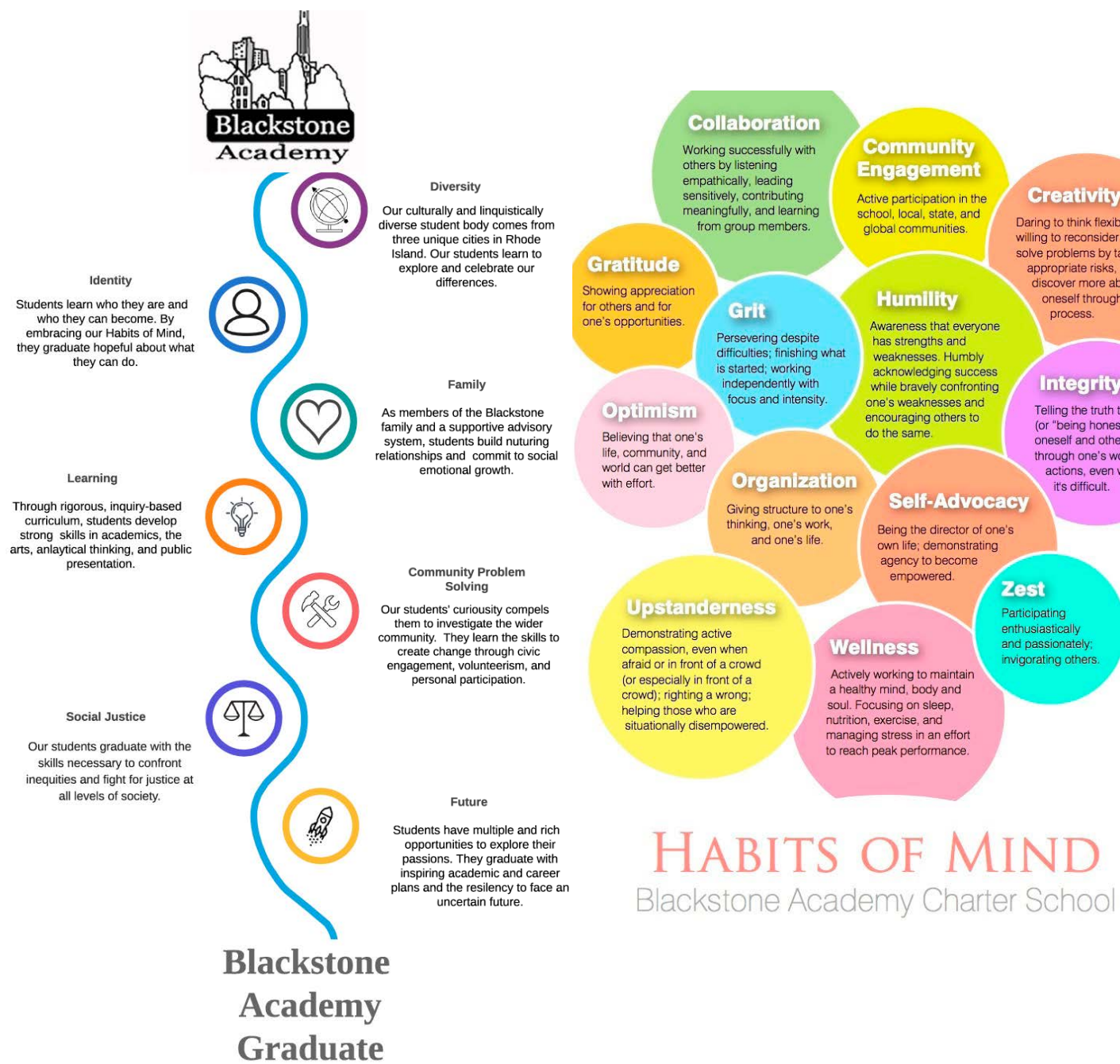
— Gabby Oulette, Class of 2023

Introduction

The complex, real-world, and community-engaged learning experience Gabby describes above exemplifies Blackstone Academy Charter School’s (BACS) aspirations for students, as well as the school’s approach to teaching and learning. Aligned with the skills, habits, and mindsets expressed in foundational documents like the Blackstone Academy Portrait of a Graduate and Habits of Mind, the experiences students engage in aspire to do more than prepare learners for lifelong personal success.

The BACS model focuses not only on what students learn, but also on who they are and how they act in the world: embracing diverse individual and community identities, solving local and global problems, and advocating for social justice. Taken together, the graduate profile, the Habits of Mind, and the authentic learning they inspire reflect Blackstone’s identity and their community’s definition of a successful adult, what Executive Director Carolyn Sheehan calls their “values, as well as outcomes.”





THE GRADUATE PROFILE AND THE HABITS OF MIND BOTH PLAY IMPORTANT ROLES IN THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE AT BLACKSTONE.

## Engaging Projects to Develop Community-Engaged Adults

Blackstone Academy's academic model emphasizes community-based projects organized around essential questions. Grounded in the vision of success captured in their Portrait of a Graduate, the goal of teaching and learning is to build a strong community of learners and leaders, young adults who emerge from school with an understanding of themselves and a sense of responsibility and investment in the wider world.

According to Kyleen Carpenter, Blackstone Academy's head of school, their model was inspired by Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, especially the focus on using essential questions as the organizing framework for learning. Teaching and learning at Blackstone, she says, is about "crafting a question that doesn't have just one right answer. So much of our curriculum is built on the fact that there are

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

These essential questions came from a brainstorm educators did in the summer of 2020. Given that most students would be experiencing distance learning, educators wanted to start the 2020-21 academic year by posing engaging questions within and across the different subject areas.

### OVERARCHING QUESTION GRADES 9 -12

- Who am I and how do I impact my world?

### GRADE 9 ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Who am I? What has shaped me?
- What makes a good community member?
- Can you still be true to yourself while in a group?

### GRADE 10 ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can I use my voice to identify problems/issues and create solutions for a problem?
- Who am I in a group? (connected to bystander, upstander)

### GRADE 11/12 ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is my role in the world?
- How do systems impact us?
- How do systems intersect, and how can I create change?
- How can I use my learning to create the future I want for myself?

### SUBJECT AREA ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

#### ENGLISH

- Who am I? What memories have shaped me?

#### WORLD HISTORY

- How have oppressed people fought for justice throughout history?
- Is violence against injustice ever justified?
- Why is it important to know statistics to understand social injustice?

#### WORLD LANGUAGE

- Who am I?
- How do we name things in a different language?
- What is the Spanish/Portuguese culture?
- How are we transformed by our study of other languages and cultures?

#### SCIENCE/MATH

- What is the hierarchy of scientific evidence?
- How do we prove things?
- How does science affect our daily life?
- How are topics in math supported in science, and topics in science supported in math?

#### CIVICS

- What are our essential rights and duties as Americans?
- How does government protect or restrict these rights?

#### ECON

- Microeconomics: How does analyzing human behavior help us to understand the economy?



many answers to those kinds of questions. Many of our families have immigrated from Senegal, Haiti, Guatemala, and many other countries, and the answers to questions are often based on kids' unique perspectives and experiences. Our role is to be a coach, which is antithetical to having a teacher in front of the room as the know-all, be-all, imparting knowledge that you will then regurgitate."

Not surprisingly, Blackstone's approach to teaching and learning favors thinking and analyzing over acquiring facts, creating and performing over memorizing, and designing for relevance and the rigor posed by solving complex, real-world problems. As Kyleen explains, "A lot of our students have had challenges with engagement, and we know that the best way to engage them is through projects that are connected to community—especially when students have choices about how the projects unfold. Inquiry-based and project-based learning is central to our model and can be seen universally throughout all disciplines at Blackstone."

"We always start with the values and principles like inquiry and then crosswalk with standards. Relevance is always part of the design," says

Carolyn. "Kids apply knowledge through real-world problem-solving and interdisciplinary projects."

Kyleen adds, "Our graduates are well prepared in thinking critically and looking at an issue from multiple perspectives and analyzing whether their sources are valid for the claim they are making. The ultimate goal is to have students apply their knowledge, even if it's factoring or verb conjugations."

Kyleen observes that close to 100 percent of Blackstone's teachers deeply embrace the community-based, project-based, and inquiry-based approach to learning. "It jazzes our teachers up to design these projects," she says. "I love to see teachers become surprised by outcomes. They may start with a theme, like health and wellness, but through a discovery and inquiry process they might go in another direction." As an example, she points to a debate project, which she often helps judge, to determine whether or not FARC, a guerilla group in South America, should have a role in Colombia's government. Although it's an annual event in history class, Kyleen observes, "I hear new arguments every time."



“A memorable project that I did for ELA was based around the play *Macbeth*, by Shakespeare. I chose to do an Instagram account from a character's point of view through the important events of the play, and the character I chose was Macbeth, the protagonist. For the Instagram page, I had to have at least ten posts from my character's perspective. This assignment was memorable for me because I've never used social media for a project, and it was something that was unique compared to other projects I have done in the past. It showed me that there can be fun as well as creativity in projects, and it doesn't always have to be strictly work.”

— Emmanuel Madrid, Class of 2024



PUTTING HIS OWN ENGAGING AND CREATIVE STAMP ON A TRADITIONAL ELA TEXT AND TOPIC, EMMANUEL MADRID USED A SERIES OF INSTAGRAM POSTS TO TRACE MACBETH'S CHARACTER ARC THROUGHOUT THE PLAY.



# Learning by Doing

During their years at Blackstone Academy, all learners participate in several signature projects, such as an annual Community Improvement Project and a grade 11 service learning project to address an issue of their own choosing. In addition to these school-wide projects, learners

engage in project-based learning at all grades and across the curriculum.

You can read about these projects in the [BACS Model Overview](#).

## PUTTING A UNIVERSITY FOUNDER ON TRIAL

John Horton, biology teacher and ninth grade dean, refers to projects as “high stakes,” explaining that students “can’t fake it. It’s going to be clear when they are taking charge and being responsible.” As an example, he describes a grade nine mock trial project which takes place on the campus of Brown University. The focus question learners are trying to answer via the trial is this: “Should John Brown be held accountable for his crimes in participating in the slave trade?” According to John, “Students spend weeks preparing, as [defense] lawyers

and prosecutors, asking questions and preparing written responses. You have to put the work in. For our students, it is one of the first times they can actually look back and reflect and know whether or not they put the work in.”

Learn more:  
[John Brown Trial Planning 2020](#)  
[John Brown Mock Trial/PEAT Rubric](#)



### Listen to this

John Horton, ninth grade dean and science teacher, talks about the ninth grade experience at Blackstone Academy.

## RESUME AND INTERVIEW FAIR

Paul Healy, a special education teacher and also the dean for the eleventh grade, describes how learning experiences integrate skills, content, and real-world application. “What teachers do,” he says, “is tie the career skills and life skills with academics. We don’t think of those as separate. For example, for many years now, in eleventh grade, they’ve been writing a resume and

business cover letter and then doing an interview fair where they meet with professionals.”

To grade 11 English teacher Erin “Mal” Malcolm, the interview event is “a really big deal” for Blackstone students. “The kids dress up and apply for a fake grant with Monopoly money. People they’ve never met before interview

them—CEO’s, the president of the school board, and other people from the community.” The event is competitive and challenging, Mal notes, and only one student wins the prize each year. However, as she explains, the experience encompasses learning for school, career, and also for life: “When I get their reflections the following week and in the ‘thank you’ notes to the interviewers, they talk about how there are many ways to be successful and many ways to be smart.”

Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person events like the interview fair, learning and applying skills in a real-world context has remained a focus. “This year, instead of a cover letter, they are writing a business email to a nonprofit,” says Paul. “They are still working on the nitty gritty writing skills but tying writing to an interest they have, such as homelessness, by writing to an organization

that is dealing with that issue.” According to Paul, what’s been really interesting is how much students have learned through this authentic writing task. “The responses students have been getting from the nonprofits about ways to help allow them to take outside learning and connect it to what they are learning in their classes.”

Learn more:  
[Resume Rubric 2020](#)  
[Info For Judges Jan 2020](#)  
[Student sample resume 1 \\*](#)  
[Student sample resume 2 \\*](#)

\* names have been changed





## CHANGING THE NARRATIVE IN ELA

The way Mal teaches literature also reflects a similar real-world approach to providing challenging learning experiences. Of her choice of texts, she says, “I’ve started caring less about the complexity of the syntax and started caring more about the complexity of the ideas in a story, especially as we work toward broadening the diversity of the core texts we use.” For example, she introduced a new book this year, *Mexican Gothic*, by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, based on its relevance to current issues in society, specifically, its “complex ideas about eugenics and institutional racism.”

Drawing on her background in game design, Mal also supports learners to develop habits and dispositions for success, like a revision mindset and perseverance. In her planning, she says, “I look for different ways to build a narrative into the experience of the unit. We take on a role and immerse ourselves in a little world. We realize that making mistakes is just a turn in the plot and not the end of the game. My students generally see what they write as the final answer, but I try to design learning so that the first time they write something, it is just the first attempt—it’s like in a game where, even if you die, you get another try.”



### Listen to this

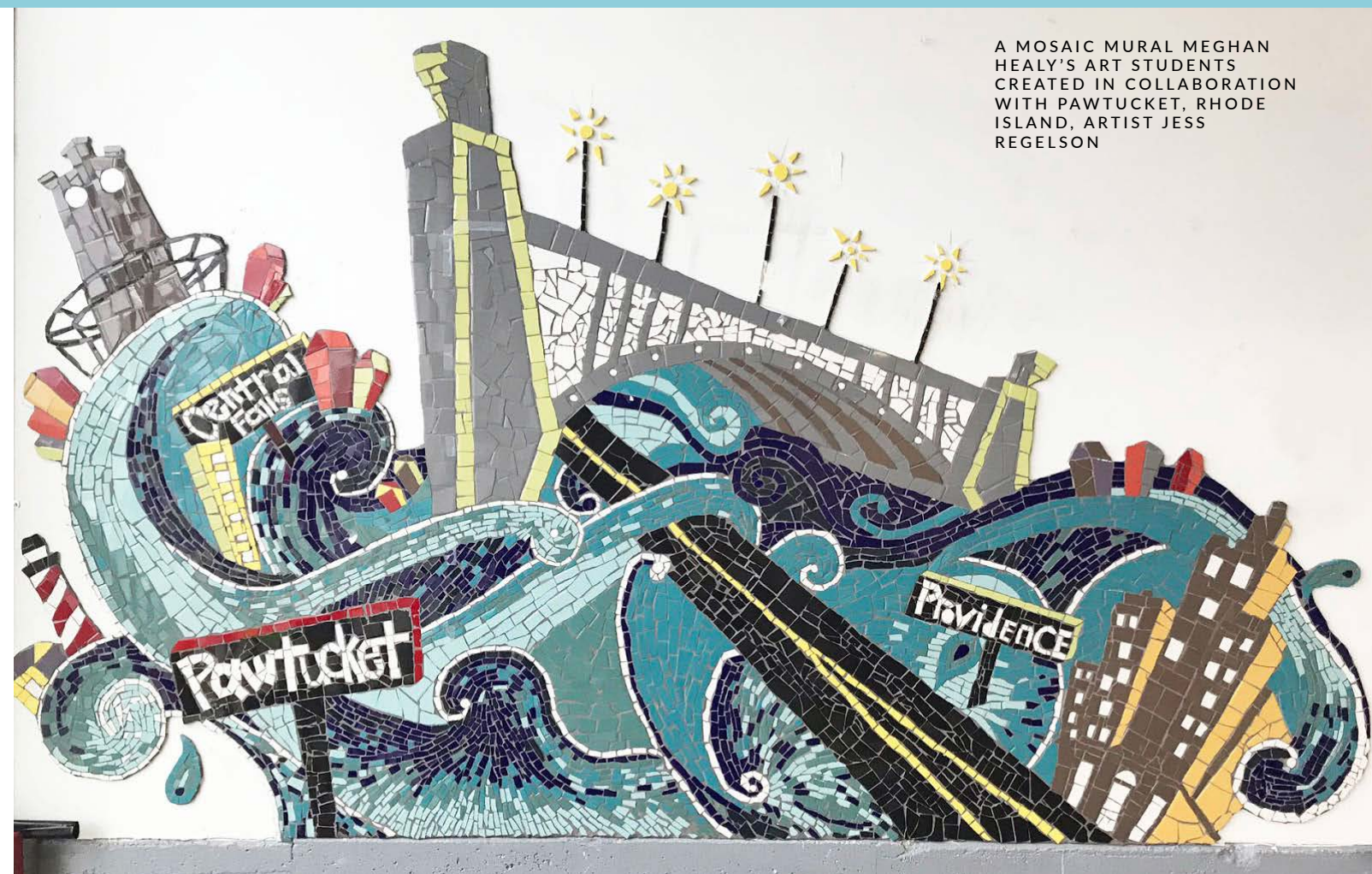
English teacher Erin “Mal” Malcolm uses a game-based approach in her teaching of literature. Listen to this podcast to hear how that plays into the students’ reading of *The Great Gatsby* and the overall learning experience in her classroom.

## PERFORMANCE (IN) ART

The emphasis on performance—learning by doing—and real-world connections is also evident in Blackstone’s approach to the arts. To graduate, learners must earn four semesters of credit in art, which includes a wide range of courses, from visual arts like painting and sculpture to performance arts like Latin dance and percussion. With evident pride, Kyleen volunteers that Blackstone has one of the best arts programs in the state. She gives credit to the talents of the school’s “amazing” arts educators, as well as to the many community artists who contribute to the arts program—a photographer, a break dancer, a musician from the Rhode Island Philharmonic Music School, and even a gubernatorial portrait painter.

“I love that we can have so many people who are working artists teaching our kids,” Kyleen says. “A lot of [students] have been programmed to think of art as something you do in school to get a credit. This is an example for them of how you can make a career out of the arts, and it shows that there are so many ways to express yourself.”

“Blackstone values the arts program so much,” agrees visual arts educator Meghan Healy, “and I am so grateful. Art is not English, but it’s a core subject here, and it can teach real-world skills.” Meghan’s approach to teaching art balances product and process, with an emphasis on the transferable skills and mindsets articulated in Blackstone’s Portrait of a Graduate. As she



A MOSAIC MURAL MEGHAN HEALY’S ART STUDENTS CREATED IN COLLABORATION WITH PAWTUCKET, RHODE ISLAND, ARTIST JESS REGELSON

explains, “I know that not everyone is going to go to art school or even take another arts class after they graduate. How can I develop their problem solving and lay the groundwork for college and career? They think that being an artist is all about making beautiful art, but so much is about figuring out the steps and trying and failing and trying and failing.”

Meghan does teach traditional art skills like drawing and painting and major movements in art history, but her students also create art through sewing, visual journaling, making sculptures from furniture found on the side of the road or duct tape suits and prom gowns, and even adding artwork to

trash cans to show that “utilitarian objects can be beautiful.” Like many of her colleagues, Meghan provides learners with authentic opportunities to showcase their work, such as at exhibition nights, in visual displays at a local art gallery in Pawtucket or Providence, or, during the pandemic, via an end-of-year virtual gallery.



### Listen to this

Visual arts may not be a career path for all students, explains teacher Meghan Healy, but the lessons learned in art class carry through to all subjects and life. Listen to this podcast to learn more.



# Performance-Based Assessment for Performance-Based Learning

Kyleen sums up her school’s approach to assessment this way: “We don’t give a lot of tests at Blackstone.” Although teachers do give quizzes, she says, summative assessments are much more likely to be projects or other demonstrations of learning than exams. In addition to the portfolio students create to showcase their learning and growth each year, she cites widespread use of performance-based assessments like poetry performances, writing for authentic audiences, art critiques and gallery events, mock trials, lab reports, and even student-created exercise videos for physical education.

Both Carolyn and Kyleen acknowledge that designing real-world projects that are also rigorous and aligned to standards is an ongoing challenge and one that they continue to work on. As Carolyn explains, “Relevance has been at the forefront of Blackstone’s learning model since the beginning, but the rigor part is harder.” Both she and Kyleen point to work that is underway throughout the school to address rigor and consistency.

For a detailed description of the portfolio, see the [BACS Model Overview](#).



## A FOCUS ON PROFICIENCY

Much of this work occurs in Professional Learning Groups (PLGs), organized primarily by subject area and often led by teachers. With support from Kyleen and from Courtney Jacobs, from [Great Schools Partnership](#), Blackstone educators work collaboratively in the PLGs on power standards, curriculum alignment,

and rubric design. According to Kyleen, who facilitates a PLG made up of world language, physical education, and arts educators, the PLGs are “pulling out power standards and looking at when and how they are assessed, norming within and across departments.”

### Blackstone Academy Proficiency-Based Framework

The collective work to build mindsets and practices for proficiency-based grading includes developing shared language and understanding of these four key elements of the model and how they work together to prepare learners for the future.

#### Portrait of a Graduate:

This is our vision for a Blackstone graduate. Our goal is to graduate students who have the skills and habits necessary to thrive in an uncertain world. Our Portrait of a Graduate outlines the personal development journey students will take in order to prepare them for an inspiring future.

#### Graduation Proficiencies:

These are the essential skills that students develop at BACS and which they will use throughout their lives. Students practice these skills in classes and through learning experiences and they demonstrate these skills to graduate.

- Communication
- Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking (changed from Informed Thinking by request of students)
- Community Engagement
- Habits of Mind\*

\*Addressed and assessed through reflection and based on growth, not “proficiency”

#### Power Standards:

These are important skills and knowledge related to each Graduation Proficiency. Students demonstrate proficiency in power standards throughout every unit and project in their courses and outside experiences. Through multiple cross-curricular opportunities, students build and strengthen their ability to master these standards.

- At BACS there is a set of Power Standards for each content area, external learning and social emotional learning (SEL)

#### Work Habits:

“How you get there.” These are the skills that students need to develop to support their academic growth. Examples of work habits might include organization, participation and timeliness of assignments. These are skills and habits that are critical to student success in school and beyond. (organization)



Kyleen notes that use of rubrics has always been the cornerstone of Blackstone's approach to assessment. However, educators are currently working in their PLGs "to improve these tools and increase consistency throughout the school." Revising rubrics, along with providing opportunities for students to "redo and demonstrate mastery" are central to the school's ongoing transition to a proficiency-based approach to grading. Kyleen notes that, in the past, Blackstone used a traditional letter-grade system aligned to a four-point GPA. However, the focus of grading is shifting away from students earning points and toward demonstrating proficiency at each grade level.

To illustrate how teachers are applying a proficiency mindset to their practices around assessment, Mal shares a recent iteration of a narrative writing rubric for ELA. She explains that, instead of focusing on content or skills related to a specific assignment, "The rubric supports development of power standard skills and graduation proficiencies over time." Contrasting this newer work product with scoring rubrics of the past, she says, "You'll notice that the rubric doesn't include number grades, since students are focused on 'leveling up' rather than achieving a specific grade."

Learn more:  
[ELA 12 ID Narrative Rubric](#)

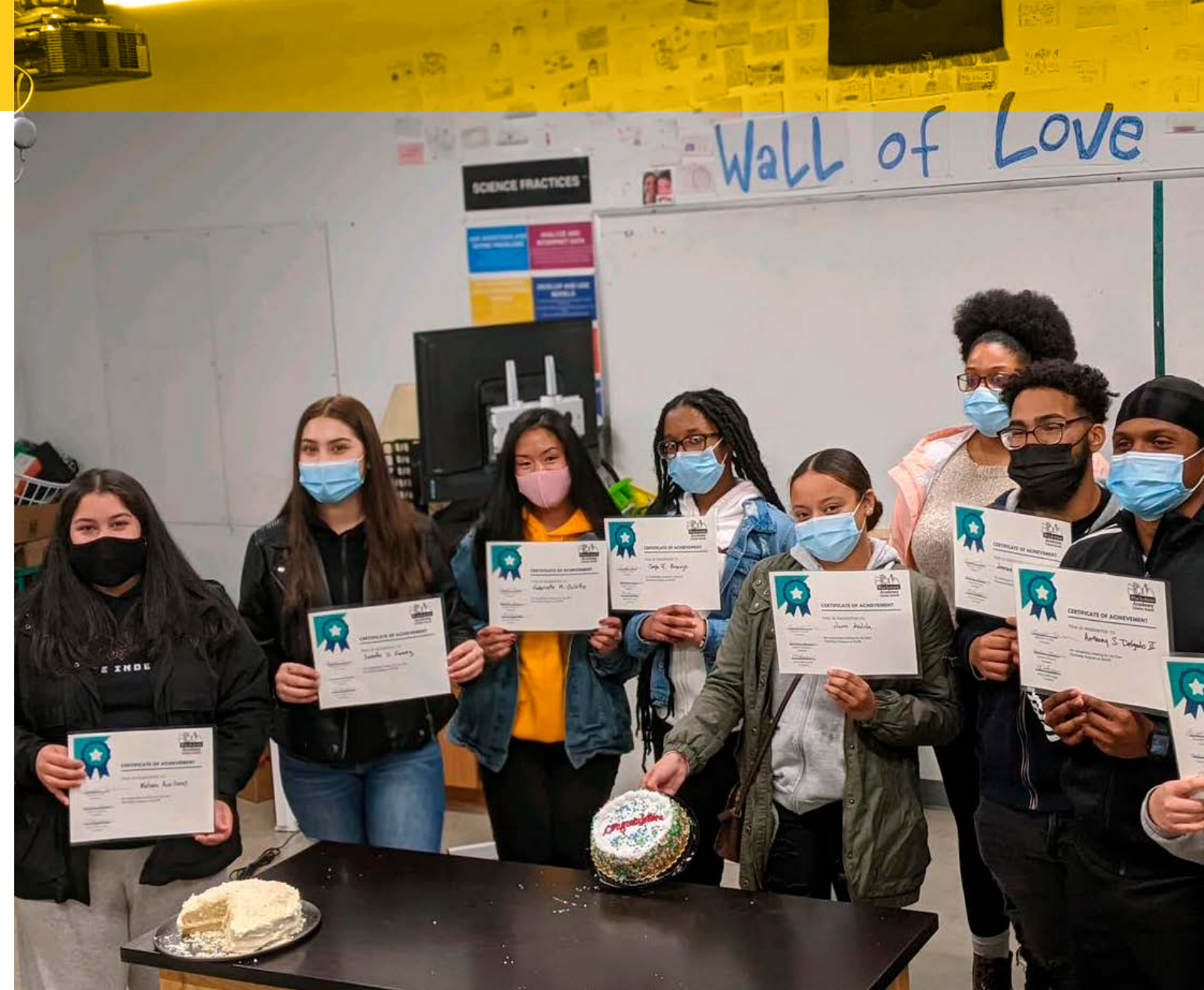
Departments have also been looking at student work and portfolios as evidence of meeting standards, Carolyn adds. "We've been challenging ourselves in the last four years to have everyone, including the community, help us know what a really good senior project looks like—research, action planning, evidence of synthesis and incorporating feedback, and skills like communication—and then improving our rubrics over time so that they scaffold toward that senior project."

The importance of balancing high expectations with developmentally appropriate scaffolding is echoed by Courtney, who has been supporting Blackstone as they implement their proficiency-based grading system. In the course of her work with the PLGs, for example, Courtney has witnessed "many good conversations among educators and a realization that [Blackstone] is really good at scaffolding, but maybe there is a need for increased rigor. How might we think more intentionally about what those scaffolds look like at different levels and when they can be removed as students progress?"

Noting a shift of culture and mindset toward learner ownership, Courtney reports that teachers at Blackstone are also asking, "How do we help students internalize the scaffolds so that they can apply them themselves?" Courtney sees evidence of this kind of learner self-direction around assessment. "Students are not doing it for the teacher," she observes. "It's about the skill. 'Here's the learning I am trying to do, and the scoring criteria are a road map.' They realize that it's part of a progression, and not who you are."

Scaffolding not only the success criteria on a rubric but also the learning it measures is not an insignificant task for Blackstone educators. Many of the school's learners enter ninth grade performing below grade level academically—as low as fourth grade in reading, according to Kyleen. Regardless of where they begin their learning journey at Blackstone, however, a very high percentage of students across all subgroups enroll in a two-year or four-year postsecondary institution within a year of graduation, including between 85 and 90 percent of English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families, according to data from 2019.

You can learn more about Blackstone's approach to college and career readiness by reading [Preparing Students for Life After High School](#) or listening to [this podcast](#).



Carolyn ties the work of establishing consistent, high standards back to the Portrait of a Graduate and the school's aspirations for learners to become agents of change in the community. "We need to make sure we support kids to a strong academic level before we expect them to get involved in community problem solving. We want to make sure they have something to offer."

To prepare their diverse learners to attain postsecondary success and become future leaders and problem solvers, Blackstone employs a robust and all-encompassing system of student support that is both data-driven and human-centered, one that often begins before grade nine and sometimes extends well past graduation.



## Doing What It Takes: Support for Academics and Lifelong Success

As explored in the [BACS Model Overview](#), Blackstone Academy's definition of success is built on two interconnected foundational documents, the Portrait of a Graduate and the Habits of Mind. Although the graduate profile focuses more on learners' skills and actions, and the Habits of Mind emphasizes mindsets and character qualities, the two are inextricably linked. Doing and being are inseparable at Blackstone. The school's approach to student support is similarly intertwined. When educators talk about addressing the academic needs of struggling learners, they are just as likely to talk about social-emotional support as they are to describe academic interventions. Most of the time, they toggle seamlessly between the two.

### WELCOMING NEW STUDENTS TO THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Blackstone's practices around helping learners transition from middle school illustrates their multi-faceted approach to student support. According to Kyleen, Blackstone students are selected by lottery and come from more than 25 different middle schools with very different models. John reports that, as ninth grade dean, he often partners with Kyleen to connect with the "sending" middle school in June and sit down with as many as eight to ten middle school staff members. "They give us the rundown on every kid, and we feel that we know them before they come," he says.

With other middle schools, Kyleen might visit, meet with their dean, and assign an advisor based on what she learns. In addition to personal outreach, she reports that educators review various data sources. One she finds particularly useful is the Rhode Island Department of Education's Early Warning System (EWS), a tool that helps educators identify learners who are at risk for not graduating from high school.

According to Kyleen, Blackstone has focused on social-emotional learning (SEL) since the school opened 19 years ago. "We don't look at it as less important than academics." Rather than distinguishing between academic and emotional development, Kyleen captures Blackstone's integrated approach to student support with a question that highlights both: "What can we do to remove obstacles so that students can be their best selves and the best learners they can be?"

This holistic conception of student development does not mean that academic supports are undervalued at Blackstone. Rather, educators tend not to talk about them in isolation, as distinct from cultivating strong relationships and Habits of Mind.

Blackstone students also take an initial "intake" assessment, NWEA's MAP, as a diagnostic so that the school can be ready to meet their academic, language, and SEL needs right away.

Once they arrive at the school, new students are welcomed into a network of supportive practices. Ninth and tenth grade teams made up of teachers from the core content areas—math, science, ELA, and social studies—meet weekly, Kyleen says, to discuss students, engage in Response to Intervention (RtI), and look at data, such as NWEA reports and other diagnostic assessments, attendance, and work completion to check in on learners' progress.

John describes the typical path for identifying and supporting struggling students. "The first step or connection," he says, "is between myself and the advisor. I might hear from the advisor that a student is not connecting with their teachers. Then I can bring it to the team meeting. We'll talk about that student in the team. Has

anyone on the team been able to connect? What is the student interested in? How can we connect with that?"

If the learning team is unsure about what kinds of support should be put in place, John says, they invite the ninth grade counselor into the discussion. The counselor is part of the student support team, which is made up of counselors

for all grades, the special education team, the school psychologist, and social work interns. Although John notes that having a clear protocol for student support is key, he adds, "it's really about getting students connected to resources early and often. Teams meet every week, so it's hard for them to slip through the cracks."

You can find out more about student support teams in the [BACS Model Overview](#).

### Team 9 Commitments: 9th Grade Team

**Blackstone's human-centered approach to supporting learners includes regular team meetings of educators. Ninth and tenth grade teams meet weekly to review student work, address student needs, and explore ways to build a strong class culture.**

#### Vision Statement:

The 9th grade team at BACS aspires to engage all students in the work of becoming capable, independent learners who care for one another and the world around them.

#### Mission Statement:

The 9th grade team at BACS helps students to thrive in a positive academic environment by setting clear expectations, developing a positive class culture and empowering students to take ownership of their education.

#### Belief Statement:

All 9th graders at BACS...

- Have the ability to achieve at a high level
- Are instrumental in developing a powerful class culture
- Will have the opportunity to form a meaningful connection with at least one adult that they trust in the building
- Will engage with each other and with the curriculum in a way that demonstrates their understanding of Blackstone's Habits of Mind
- Will feel empowered to participate in shaping the world not in spite of their identities and backgrounds but because of the fact that they are confident in their interpretation of their identities and backgrounds

#### Team Commitments:

Our team will commit ourselves to the following practices this school year:

- Clear Goals
- Communicate vulnerability in an open and honest way
- Be generous when people are off the mark
- Meeting Rotation that includes the following activities:
  - Curriculum discussion and looking at student work
  - Discussing student needs - students of concern and high achievers
  - Class Culture
  - Relevant Texts
- Check-in





## FORGING RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST

With academics at Blackstone, as with social-emotional development, supportive relationships between adults and learners are paramount. “Academic support can come from any angle,” says Kyleen. “We involve the family, the learning team, the advisor, and the learner. We ask, ‘what do you need?’ and give kids language to talk about it. We normalize asking for and receiving help.” Blackstone educators also use family surveys and home visits to create a web of supporting relationships that encompasses students’ home lives with their identities as learners. According to Kyleen, “The Coalition of Essential Schools talks about every student having one trusted adult, and we have two, three, or four.”

John also prioritizes trusting relationships as a prerequisite for academic success in his science classes. “I care a lot about biology, but in the first couple of months, that’s on the back burner. Sure, we go out into nature, observe, and learn, but we all put relationships first.” Using the example of the BioBlitz, a trip he typically organizes to Colt State Park in Bristol, Rhode Island, during the first quarter, he adds, “We are going to do some cool stuff and do some interesting biology, but first we have to develop a class culture, and you can’t do that unless the relationships are there.”

Learn more:  
[Creature Power Project Handout](#)  
[Student Work for "Creature Power Project"](#)

## COVID-19's Impact on Learning

Speaking about the impact of the pandemic and distance learning on student support, Paul expresses his belief that, “this year hasn’t slowed us down and in some ways has strengthened us. We are having more parent meetings, and kids are checking in more because it’s virtual and easy and convenient. The challenges that have come up are strengthening what we wanted to do. We want to go back to normal, but not in every way. I love and want to keep some of these things.”

Referring to parent engagement as the “COVID silver lining,” Carolyn says, “Parents have high expectations for their kids. We want them to be part of the journey. Right now, parent involvement is unlike anything we’ve seen before. They all know how to use the technology. They Zoom in with the cellphone in the Walmart cart. Parents are busy as heck, but they are in the meeting.”



## SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

John and Paul, both grade-level deans, also identify academic enrichment classes and homework club as school-wide support systems. According to John, ninth graders may be assigned to the skills-based master math and reading classes for additional support based on the results of the initial assessment. Homework club, which is staffed by teachers, meets after school and provides space and support for academics on a drop-in basis during the hour between when the school day ends and after-school activities begin.

Paul notes, however, that Blackstone's approach to supporting learners is changing, something that he is "pretty proud of." Pointing to shifts toward a push-in model for special education services and better collaboration with subject-area teachers, he says, "More support is happening within the class and then extra support outside of it. We are being proactive now. We do a pretty good job getting to know students and really thinking about what they need." As an example, he tells the story of a learner who was feeling overwhelmed by the amount of content in chemistry. Paul worked with the science teacher to streamline the content and prioritize scientific processes. The student now attends the chemistry class on some days and spends other class periods in the lab doing experiments with Paul.


Mal describes some of the ways she supports learners in her eleventh grade ELA class. In addition to common modifications like supplying sentence starters and completed notes, she uses her passion for game design to integrate supports in a way that is both fun and targeted to learners' needs. She explains, "You can't just say, 'If you get it wrong, you can try again.' You really have to design it like a game." For example, she borrows a concept from the Mario Kart video games, in which race participants who lag behind can access the best prizes. "If a kid is struggling,"

she explains, "they might get an awesome, engaging role or the best tool in an activity; a stronger student might get a role that pushes them but is more boring. In a play, the struggling student might get to play the main character. That way, they can get feedback and support in the form of acting notes."

Abigail Areche, a Blackstone learner, class of 2023, refers to the level of support and encouragement she encountered from her very first day at BACS as "overwhelming, but in a good way," and then laughs. "Coming from a (traditional) public school, I was not expecting this much attention, such a spotlight on me. Teachers asked me, 'What do you want to do? How can I help you?' Even teachers I had never met."

More recently, Abigail describes the support she received during the pandemic. "It was hard to stay motivated," she recalls. "It was all online. I was unmotivated and lost. I fell behind on everything." When she reached out for support in math and chemistry, she found teachers and support staff who took the time to explain or re-explain the content in ways that made sense to her. "I'm not always a science-y person," she admits, "but my chemistry teacher broke it down, invited more questions, and caught me up so well that I was a pro in the class."

Abigail sums up her experience this way: "Blackstone honestly has a family feel. There is no way you can feel left out."



“Coming from a (traditional) public school, I was not expecting this much attention, such a spotlight on me. Teachers asked me, ‘What do you want to do? How can I help you?’ Even teachers I had never met.”

— Abigail Areche, Class of 2023



## Learner Agency, for Students and Adults

Blackstone's aspirations for learners, as expressed in the Portrait of a Graduate and Habits of Mind, promote a definition of success that encompasses skills, competencies, and dispositions, not merely to learn about the world, but also to have an impact on it. As a result, Blackstone's model affords numerous opportunities in all subjects and grades for learners to exercise agency in their own learning and in the wider community.

Limited by its size, 350 students, Blackstone does not offer as many courses and electives as a comprehensive high school. As Kyleen explains, "We are small, so our requirements are fairly narrow. Choice happens within the courses and with a wide variety of experiences throughout the program." In addition to major projects like the service learning project in grade 11 and the Senior Project described in the [BACS Model Overview](#), Blackstone learners pursue "passion projects" across all subject areas and are often empowered to define their own contexts for mastering content standards.

### LEARNERS AS LEADERS

"We train students to speak up and advocate for themselves," Kyleen says, but learner voice does not end there. Blackstone students do more than make choices to direct their own learning; they also help direct and shape the school. For example, learner agency includes evaluating their teachers as part of the educator evaluation cycle each year. According to Kyleen, Blackstone augments the Rhode Island Department of Education's evaluation instruments with elements that the school community has agreed upon. One of these additional components involves teachers administering an evaluation

Learn more:  
[BACS Course Progression 20-21](#)

Abigail, for example, considers one of her most memorable learning experiences at Blackstone to be a series of projects organized around a current social issue of her choosing. "It was the beginning of this year," she recalls. "There was a lot of focus on social justice and movements like Black Lives Matter, and teachers did not shy away from the topic." Abigail identified mass incarceration of people of color, especially Black men, as her issue to focus on and then had the opportunity to explore it through the lens of all of her content areas. In her math class, for example, she researched statistics on incarceration rates by race. "It was very interesting to look at the numbers—the actual statistics—and use math to convert them to proportions to present to the class." In English, she wrote a narrative essay about a girl who lost her father and, years later, her brother as a result of policies in the U.S. criminal justice system. "Not only were we learning about our issue, but we also got to express our new perspectives in our work."

survey to students and then writing a reflection on the results, to be shared with Kyleen.

Learn more:  
[Student Evaluation of Teachers Questionnaire](#)

Students also play a key role in school leadership by serving on committees, where they work side by side with adults on projects like revising the school handbook, creating the Portrait of a Graduate, writing grant applications, and even hiring teachers. To illustrate ways BACS learners lead, Carolyn describes some of the work under-

taken by BACS 2.0, originally a small group of student leaders and now a credit-bearing course that develops and harnesses youth leadership in support of school redesign and improvement. For example, members of the BACS 2.0 group helped facilitate adult learning in the Blackstone community.

"A group of them decided to co-create family workshops using their own parents as test groups," Carolyn recalls. "For one of these events, school leaders, parents, and students got trained together in how to use a simple protocol for quick classroom walk-throughs." Prompted by the tool to identify examples of rigor in action and instructional practices like collaborative groups, the observers—students and adults—met afterward to discuss and process what they had seen in classrooms, as well as give feedback. "A lot of what we've been doing is curating and developing students' skills so they can be leaders," Carolyn explains.

According to Jesus Alverdi Cante, class of 2022 and member of BACS 2.0, the pandemic had a strong impact on student leaders' priorities for school improvement. The BACS 2.0 group's focus in 2020, for example, was on "how to make graduation the best it can be," in spite of the need to design it as a virtual event. This past year, he chose teacher morale as his project for the course. After hearing through Mal, his English teacher, that some of the staff "felt bad that they could not reach out to students," Jesus gathered a dozen learners from his advisory and from the BACS 2.0 class to create a video in response to "the struggles of teachers since COVID hit."

"This is a really hard time," Jesus observes. "Everyone struggled, and I felt that staff struggled the most. My [BACS 2.0] teacher Gretta [Schaaf] and I talked about making a video that would motivate them and help them feel better—to shout out how teachers are trying their best and that we really appreciate how they kept us on track and helped us feel better about ourselves."





According to Kyleen, ceding power to learners requires nontraditional educator mindsets. “Teachers have to be comfortable with the gray areas of not fully directing their courses every moment.” Embracing an inquiry approach to learning, she says, is at the “top of my list” for bringing on new teachers. Carolyn notes that Blackstone is fortunate to be so close to Brown University, whose Master of Arts in Teaching program was greatly influenced by Ted Sizer’s work. As a result, she says, many Blackstone teachers graduate from that program and “walk in the door with great ideas on how to teach content in an inquiry-based, project-based learning approach.”

To help educators live out the skills and mindsets needed to support self-direction for students, Blackstone similarly empowers educators to exercise autonomy and direct their own learning. Like the learners they teach, Blackstone educators exercise considerable agency over their learning. “We don’t direct it,” Kyleen states simply. Teachers are supported to pursue individual learning opportunities that arise, but much of the full-faculty professional learning, she says, is “home-grown PD” based on requests, like those that emerge from teachers’ end-of-year reflections. She notes that schools often “miss the boat on the extraordinary nerds on their staff. Our teachers share what they are nerding out on, and I invite them to showcase their nerd-dom and their expertise. For example, one of our teachers is rabid about supporting bilingual learners in math and another is a real Shakespeare freak.”

Blackstone does invite outside experts to facilitate learning, but these experiences, too, are prompted by teacher requests, such as a series on trauma-informed instruction, or as part of an

ongoing theme or shared commitment, like their collective professional learning on equity. Kyleen explains, “The work to deepen our understanding of equity and how it relates to our predominantly White faculty has been a consistent theme over a few years and will never be done.”

As with Blackstone’s learners, educators can pursue multiple opportunities to develop their leadership capacity. For example, Kyleen calls out activities like facilitating PLGs, serving as a dean for a grade level (with a reduced teaching load), or leading ad hoc committees to address problems, a role for which they are compensated.

Systems and structures can support a culture of empowerment, but ultimately, Blackstone teachers always return to the importance of relationships. Adults and learners alike thrive in the same kind of culture, one built on caring and trust. Mal, for example, describes her experience teaching at Blackstone this way: “We have the absolute trust of our leaders, peers, and families.” For Meghan, the culture she saw while visiting Blackstone nine years ago convinced her to quit her job in advertising to become an art teacher: “It felt like every student lived and breathed Blackstone. They really wanted to be there, and the teachers were so invested in knowing students as individuals.”

In Courtney’s words, “A foundation of love and respect is the heart and soul of Blackstone Academy.”





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[Blackstone Academy Charter School: Model Overview](#), also published by NGLC.

[Preparing Students for Life After High School](#), also published by NGLC.



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BLACKSTONE ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL'S  
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