

## **Supporting Students Learning through COVID-19: A Conversation with Big Picture Learning**

Monday, April 26, 2021

In this Webinar presented by AYPF with the support of The Hewlett Foundation, **Eunice Mitchell** and **Dr. Sonn Sam**, Regional Directors for Big Picture Learning, and **Dr. Lisa Chen**, Director of Virtual Learning for Louisa County Public Schools in Virginia, discussed the learning processes and successes discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Big Picture Learning**

**Eunice Mitchell and Dr. Sonn Sam**, Regional Directors at Big Picture Learning, shared the importance of showing up to spaces as their authentic selves. BPL believes in activating the potential of schools, systems, and education through both the centering of students and using real-world experiences in education. Mitchell addressed the ways in which schooling in 2020 was shaped, not just by COVID-19, but by social justice reform through the Black Lives Matter Movement, and environmental justice through the natural disasters seen throughout the world. She discussed how these events were in some ways informative and relevant in the classroom. BPL embraced these shifts and encouraged their students to do the same and, in many ways, this was very exciting and at the same time challenging. BPL has been centering students for 26 years. They center students by giving them agency, trusting them, and giving them authentic opportunities to learn. BPL uses an Advisory System where Advisors (teachers) create the infrastructure and the eco-system where an individual student can thrive based on their unique interest and passion, while being anchored in community. Most Big Picture schools have a 15:1 student to advisor ratio, and each student is connected to a mentor in an industry of their choosing based on an interest or concern. Before and throughout COVID-19 BPL has worked to ensure that families are involved in the education formula. Spending the time to create quality and meaningful relationships and engaging genuinely with students and their interests have remained at the forefront of BPL's Model even as COVID-19 forced online education.

**Dr. Sonn Sam**, Regional Director for BPL, spoke next and started by affirming that BPL does not have all the answers and that this year has been challenging for BPL as other schools. Sam discussed the importance of the 10 pillars and how those pillars helped anchor their schools during the pandemic. They are as follows: Play, Timing, Time, Practice, Choice, Relationships, Authenticity, Relevance, Challenge, and Application. Play is a space and time where the stakes are low, where failure is expected, and where tinkering is honored. Timing and time involved each student learning at their own pace, and not having to follow the scope and sequence as dictated for every student; each young person can decide in real time in which order they would like to learn. The pillar of practice is a "full-time" pillar, important in school, at home, and in the real world. This pillar centers around academic skills, social emotional skills, and industry skills. Choice involved what and how students want to learn. Relationships includes the maintaining and engaging in real relationships with students, educators, and mentors. Authenticity is crucial to the creation of a student-centered learning environment because it makes the world much more real for young people. Instead of learning about sustainability, students are encouraged to act sustainably in their internships and in their communities. Relevance is directly connected to the interest and engagement of students in the community. The pillar challenge is about uniquely creating challenges for each student as opposed to the common approach of seeking what is challenging for the most kids as many educators do out of necessity. The last pillar, application, focuses on the application of the other 9 pillars and the skills earned from them to action within the lives of the

students. These 10 expectations were pivotal in the transitions young students went through during COVID-19. Additionally, these pillars can be adapted by any parent or educator looking to adjust the structure they provide young people.

Eunice Mitchell came back to discuss the idea of educators as cartographers during the pandemic. Under this analogy educators needed to be aware of the conditions surrounding students in the pandemic, such as community resources and family resources so that educators could cater to the needs of students. If adults in education shift their focus to the kids directly, it helps things come together.

Next, Dr. Sonn Sam spoke to the importance of real-world and experiential learning, even during the pandemic, through the programs and collaborations BPL offers. First, Sam introduced the Big Picture Living Initiative, which partnered with the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, to identify six measures of healthy living. They include nutrition, sleep, stress management, physical activity, relationships, and avoiding at risk behaviors. BPL opened this initiative up to their young people and they are leading the way. The youth team is called the Skunks Team and they are leading the work of spreading this information throughout the organization and their communities. It is an international cohort of young people deepening their knowledge around healthy living through weekly meetings. While not all internships preserved the in-person learning model, some internships such as the CTE program in association with [Habor Freight Fellows](#) continued to be in-person with COVID-19 adaptations because it was clear that there was still demand for the work. In fact, demand increased. Another initiative Sam highlighted was Project Insight, a US-specific initiative which is a vision-based fellowship where young people participate in virtual internships with a focus on equity within ophthalmology. This initiative came about as an opportunity to support the eye care of underserved communities. Sam spoke to one of the ways in which COVID-19 strengthened the real-world programming aspect of BPL. Pre-pandemic all partnerships were local and community-based, and while those programs will remain intact, BPL will also be maintaining national and international partnerships that were started by the access to virtual workspaces during the pandemic.

There are five practices that BPL works to promote: 1. One Student at a Time, 2. Advisory System, 3. Real World Internship Components, 4. Interest Driven Learning and 5. Authentic Assessment. These are demonstrated through the previously mentioned pillars and the unique learning practices of BPL Schools across the world. BPL run schools in Australia, Canada, India, Israel, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Italy, Kenya, Netherlands, Kazakstan, Barbados, and Belize. Dr. Sonn highlighted the work BPL is doing in Australia to scale access to college-level education through the expansion of assessment options. They partnered with a local university and took a research-based approach to the question: How do we know students are ready for college? They leaned into competencies in their research. For decades, Australia has had one test that all students take that decides whether they go to college. Now, BPL has helped create a new certification system for colleges to use to accept students.

Eunice Mitchell concluded the BPL session of this webinar by reiterating the essence of their work being the continued conversation around what it means to be an educator in this moment and in the long haul. Being an educator means helping students to fully grow and express themselves and assist them in finding a path into adulthood that is their own in desire and creation.

**Louisa County Public Schools, Virginia**

**Dr. Lisa Chen**, Director of Virtual Learning for Louisa County Public Schools in Virginia, opened the next session of the Webinar by discussing her role in Louisa County. Louisa County is a small district of about 5,000 students with one high school, one middle school, four elementary schools, and one alternative learning school. 53 percent of Louisa County students are on free and reduced lunch, and because Louisa County is rural, there is limited access to broadband. When COVID-19 hit, one-third of their families chose to learn virtually. Immediately questions of equity were raised and the creation of the LCPS Virtual Academy was created by the start of school on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Technology coaches held webinars and sessions for the teachers who had chosen to teach virtually. Louisa County was very purposeful and strategic in their planning to more effectively administer virtual learning. Teachers worked with other teachers to set up classroom websites and other forms of communication with students. K-1 was done through [SeeSaw](#) which came with a critical writing team to help develop a more strategic curriculum. For grades 2-12, there was engagement with Chromebook and using google classroom. Administering student surveys helped Louisa County to be as successful as they were. They created “Wow Units,” \* and set-up solar powered hot spots that were placed all over the county in churches and parking lots so that more students could have access to virtual school. Dr. Lisa Chen discussed the lessons learned which included the necessity of emotionally supporting each other; the reality of less is more and knowing that because of COVID-19, teachers cannot teach everything that they would in a given year; and the importance of prioritizing standards, being clear, and building relationships are key, especially with families, in virtual learning. Louisa County worked to make as much learning as possible accessible offline. A problem-solving council of parents and teachers was created. Dr. Lisa Chen reiterated the importance of reducing the amount of content to what is most needed so students can spend more time on critical components. She also highlighted that, when creating video lessons, teachers should make them short enough so that students can watch them over if they need to.

## **Q&A Session**

### **What does real-world student-centered learning look like in a real-world scenario?**

Dr. Sonn Sam discussed the real-world component of BPL in comparison with career research projects. In many schools, students do research projects about career fields they might be interested in to learn more about them. BPL connects students with internships related to their interest. If a student is interested in graphic design, BPL helps them connect with a Graphic designer, giving the student the opportunity to both see firsthand what a graphic designer actually does in a typical day, but also the opportunity to support the graphic designer in their work and pick up skills in the field.

Eunice Mitchell discussed the use of a learning plan to help students manage obtaining and maintaining an internship. BPL also uses a management tool called Emblaze Internship Platform that helps schools organize the different phases of internships both virtual and in-person.

### **What has been particularly challenging in pivoting to online learning and how did you overcome?**

Dr. Lisa Chen discussed the challenges of keeping track of students. Despite phone calls and house visits, there were still some issues connecting with all Louisa County school students. Though, some teachers did achieve 100 percent success rates. There was no penalty for students who could not meet online

even with the school's attempt to provide access to hot spots. Teachers have felt disconnected from students when students have kept their cameras off during class, even though there is an understanding that there are several good reasons for this practice. Some teachers wrote letters to students to inspire them to connect. Louisa County also held game and info nights for parents with prizes and other incentives so that parents could be informed about the adjustments to schooling.

**Are there any resources for adult learners who are struggling with online interactions now that most businesses and universities are online?**

Dr. Sonn Sam mentioned this website which supported BPL's transition to online learning. He spoke to the importance of understanding the Learning Management System one is using.

Eunice Mitchell spoke to the existence of community support, which can be found at career fairs, local libraries, and other events.

Dr. Chen provided in the chat [this](#)<sup>1</sup> link to resources on virtual learning.

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This event summary was written by Taylor Cole, AYPF Research and Policy Intern Spring and Summer 2021

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<sup>1</sup> Password for website is: Engagement