

Big Picture Learning:

Mission: Big Picture Learning's mission is to lead vital changes in education, both in the United States and internationally, by generating and sustaining innovative, personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world of the greater community. We believe that in order to sustain successful schools where authentic and relevant learning takes place, we must continually innovate techniques and test learning tools to make our schools better and more rigorous. Lastly, we believe that in order to create and influence the schools of the future, we must use the lessons learned through our practice and research to give us added leverage to impact changes in public policy.

History:



Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor

established Big Picture Learning in 1995 with the sole mission of encouraging, inciting and effecting change in the U.S. educational system. Dennis and Elliot merged their thirty years of individual experiences as teachers and principals in public high schools and their distinct national reputations for successful educational innovation to co-direct this effort.

With a motto of: ‘education is everyone’s business’ and an intention to demonstrate that schooling and education can and should be radically changed, the Big Picture was born.

In the schools that Big Picture Learning envisioned, students would take responsibility for their own education. They would spend considerable time doing real work in the community under the tutelage of volunteer mentors and they would not be evaluated solely on the basis of standardized tests. Instead, students would be assessed on their performance, on exhibitions and demonstrations of achievement, on motivation, and on the habits of mind, hand, heart, and behavior that they display – reflecting the real world evaluations and assessments that all of us face in our everyday lives.



Around the same time, the state of Rhode Island was re-examining its educational system, particularly its vocational and technical programs. **Big Picture proposed a school design – a bold new school dedicated to educating one student at a time.** After garnering considerable community support, the state legislature approved the concept for the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, informally referred to as ‘the Met’. The first of the six schools opened in 1996 with a freshman class of 50 students – mostly ‘at-risk’ African American and Latino students who ‘did not fit’ in conventional schools.

The first Met class graduated in 2000 with a 96% graduation rate. Ninety-eight percent of the graduates were admitted to postsecondary institutions. They received \$500,000 in scholarship funds to help fund their college educations.



Clearly, the Met worked; And each subsequent graduating class has matched or bettered its predecessor. Many of these teenagers are the first in their families to earn a high school diploma, and 80% of them are the first in their families to enroll in college.

With these groundbreaking successes came considerable national attention. **The director of educational programs at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced that the Met was his favorite high school in America, and that the U.S. needs more schools like it.** In 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave Big Picture Learning a large grant to replicate the Met around the country. In 2003, after the continued success of Big Picture schools, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pledged a second grant to fund the launch of even more schools. Also, in 2003, the Gates Foundation awarded Big Picture monies to make them lead convener of the newly formed Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI).



By 2008, over 60 Big Picture schools are operating in 14 states, supported by yet another investment in Big Picture Learning by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our international presence continues to grow, with schools in Australia, Israel and the Netherlands utilizing the Big Picture Learning design. **All of these schools – from Tennessee to Tasmania, from New York City to the Netherlands – embody the fundamental philosophy of Big Picture Learning, educating one student at a time in a community.** In addition, Big Picture and the National League of Cities were awarded a second grant in 2008 from the Gates Foundation to further the work of AHSI through partnerships with select American cities (Nashville, Indianapolis, and Camden) to expand the portfolio of educational options available to students.

Within a decade, we established ‘proof of concept’ and demonstrated that Big Picture schools can be replicated. **Now, we are preparing to begin a new phase of Big Picture’s evolution.** We will be devoting our time and energy to the challenging and urgent mission of changing the way Americans think about the public education system. Instead of one that judges students and sets limits for achievement, we are building a school system that inspires and awakens the possibilities of an engaged and vital life within our youth.



Big Picture Learning is shifting our emphasis from directly starting new schools to three broad areas of work that are strategic, unified and synergistic, informed by research and best practice, and respectful of individual and organizational change. Through our practices and schools, and our intense dissemination efforts, all of our work is intended to influence the national debate about public education. We want to help convince opinion leaders (policymakers, business leaders, media representatives, and educators) as well as parents and the public, that there are better ways to educate our children.

Big Picture Learning School Distinguishers

Big Picture Learning schools are unique environments where students can flourish as individuals within a community of learners. Many elements within our learning design are uncommon and distinct, and set Big Picture schools apart from most schools. We call these common characteristics ‘distinguishers’, as they distinguish the Big Picture Learning design from other learning designs or models.

Big Picture Learning’s School Distinguishers, listed below, exist as a comprehensive whole. They are interrelated and inform one another – none work in isolation. It is the seamless integration of reflection-based action and the distinguishers that result in the powerful success of the Big Picture Learning design.

The Ten Distinguishers are:

1. Learning In the Real World: LTI
2. One Student At A Time: Personalization
3. Authentic Assessment
4. School Organization
5. Advisory Structure

6. School Culture
7. Leadership
8. Parent/Family Engagement: Adult Support
9. School/College Partnership: College Preparation and Support
10. Professional Development

Learning in the Real World: Learning through Internships (LTI)

The most important element of the education at a Big Picture Learning school is that students learn in the real world. The main component of every student's education is the LTI (Learning through Internship/Interest). In this internship with an expert mentor in the field of the student's interest, the student completes an authentic project that benefits the student and the mentor at the internship site. The projects are connected to the student's interests and meet the needs of the mentors, and are the main root to deepening student learning and academic growth.

There are three primary reasons for connecting real world, adult mentors to the schooling process:

1. Students learn how to be adults by being with adults.

Teenagers are on the brink of adulthood, and we believe the best way for them to learn how to be an adult is by being immersed in the adult world. With mentoring, a young person steps into that adult world on a regular basis, and interacts with a variety of adults. Mentoring moves a young person beyond the familiarity of the adults in his or her personal life and provides a broader range of role models.

2. The expertise is out in the real world.

Advisors know a great deal about human development and their own specialties. However, Big Picture schools do not expect advisors to know about all the interests that their students may have. The expertise of a mentor in her/his field is valuable to both the student and to the advisor. Mentors become living examples of the careers that students are thinking of pursuing.

3. The guidance is invaluable.

The mentor-intern relationship is special for people of all ages. The guidance and direction that mentors give is personal, and based on the intern's own particular needs, talents, and interests. There is a level of comfort in this kind of guidance (for students) that makes it possible to learn through both accomplishments and mistakes. For teenagers, it can be an especially important haven during the tumultuousness of adolescence.

Essential Elements of Learning in the Real World include:

- Mentors who are experts in their respective fields

- Authentic projects at internships that involve academic investigation
- Mentor training provided by the Big Picture Learning school
- Mentor recognition and celebrations hosted by the Big Picture Learning school
- A School-based LTI Coordinator providing mentor and student support
- Advisor meetings with mentors
- Experiential learning and trips
- The integration of summer learning opportunities
- Service learning
- Exposure to a diversity of learning experiences
- Senior Thesis Projects

One Student at a Time - Personalization

Learning at a Big Picture school is not constrained by the school day or to the school year – it is constrained only by our guiding principle that schools must be personalized, educating one student at a time.

The philosophy of educating one student at a time expands beyond “academic” work and involves looking at and working with each student holistically. Each student’s work is documented on an individual learning plan created and updated each quarter (or trimester) with the learning team (the student, parent(s), advisor, and whenever possible, internship mentor) in a learning plan meeting.

All the components that make up the student’s learning experience – the curriculum; the learning environment; the use of time during the school day; the choice of workshops or college classes; the focus and depth of investigation through the Big Picture learning goals – is developed based on the student’s individual interests, talents, and needs.

Personalizing education is about doing what is best for kids – pushing and pulling at the right time, not dictating or punishing, but problem solving and mediating. Overall, the school’s job is to know each student well and to provide the right measures of challenge and support for each student in order to promote growth. Students must also take responsibility for and ownership of their learning by pursuing their interests and passions deeply in the real world and at school. Students are encouraged to pursue their interests in-depth in order to grow personally and academically, and are given credit for learning experiences gained outside of the school day or the academic year.

Essential Elements of One Student at a Time – Personalization include:

- Individual learning plans created each quarter by the student’s learning plan team
- Strong parent/family engagement
- A learning plans that focuses on individual student’s interests, passions, talents, and needs
- Understanding and pursuit of the Big Picture Learning Goals
- Students are responsible to follow their interests
- Personalized learning environment
- Independent work time
- Academic rigor
- Mediation (peer and adult)
- Student workshops
- Choice of college classes
- One-on-one meetings with advisors
- Summer learning plans

Authentic Assessment:

Big Picture Learning views learning as a process of growth and change that is accentuated by the creation of quality products. There are high expectations for each student in a Big Picture Learning school. Assessment criteria is individualized and fit to each student based on the real world standards of the student’s project (as gauged by the student’s mentor). Students in Big Picture schools are not assessed by tests and are not given grades.

Assessments instead include public exhibitions (one per quarter or trimester which tracks student growth and progress, quality of work, and academic depth in the learning goals), weekly check-in meetings with advisors, weekly journals, yearly presentation portfolios, and transcripts (which translate the Big Picture Learning design in a way that colleges can understand). Gateways for student progress are between 10th and 11th grade and at graduation. The Gateways serve as signposts for that students have completed necessary work and have achieved the goals set in their learning plan.

Essential Elements of Authentic Assessment include:

- Exhibitions

- Portfolios
- Narrative assessments (written by students and by advisors)
- Real-world standards for assessment guidelines
- No grades
- Weekly individual check-ins (between advisor and student)
- Reflective Journaling
- Gateway to Senior Institute
- Graduation readiness
- Autobiographies (approximately 75 to 100 pages)
- Depth of work
- Academic transcripts
- Big Picture 101, 201, 301, 401

School Organization:

Big Picture schools use time, people, facilities, resources, and space in unique ways. Big Picture Learning believes that all students should have the opportunity to learn in a place where people know each other well and treat each other with respect. Schools must be small – small enough so every student has genuine relationships with adults and other students and no one falls through the cracks. From assessment tools to the design of the school building itself, a truly personalized school approaches each student and situation with a mind to what is best for the individual and for the community.

The organizing principle of Big Picture schools is to educate one student at a time. In order to carry out our design, we believe that each school should not exceed 150 students and no more than fifteen students make up an advisory. Students work individually as well as in small group learning environments around authentic topics both in and outside of school.

Each school is a small community of learning, is part of a system of small schools in their geographic area and is also a part of the international Big Picture school network. School facilities are small, personalized and are organized to facilitate the Big Picture programmatic design. This is reflected in the outside-in/inside-out design of the schools where real-world learning occurs in the community as well as in the school. The Big Picture Learning design necessitates interdependence between the school and the community.

A Big Picture School cannot exist in a vacuum, separate from the community. The core of the students' education is the Learning through Internship/Interest (LTI). As a result, the community plays an integral role in the educational success of the school.

Essential Elements of School Organization include:

- Small school and small advisories
- A culture of communication among staff and students within the building
- Learning Through Internship/Interest (LTIs) in the community
- Weekly staff meetings for staff
- Written reflection shared among staff members
- The community as a resource to the school/the school as a resource to the community
- Service learning projects in the community
- Facilities that reflect the Big Picture Learning design

Advisory Structure:

The advisory structure is the core organizational and relational structure of a Big Picture school. It is the heart and soul of the school and is often described as the “home” and “second family” by students. Our goal is for all Big Picture Learning students to be a part of a small advisory of no more than fifteen students with one advisor who works with the students throughout their entire high school career.

The advisor's role is to manage each student's individual, personalized learning plan and Learning through Internship/Interest (LTIs) placement. To do this, the advisor must build a relationship with each student and his/her family (this includes home visits and one-on-one meetings with each student). Though certified in one area, the advisor does not “teach” his or her subject area; rather he or she needs to draw on many disciplines to meet the needs of each student, each student's project, and to design advisory activities.

The advisor is a coach, mentor, teacher, manager, and often – friend. Advisors guide students in learning how to manage their time, plan their work, find internships, and complete projects. Advisors coach students to seek and build authentic learning experiences inside and outside of the school building.

The advisor also organizes advisory time to meet the needs of the students. S/he facilitates group activities that are designed to expose students to new ideas and concepts, provide academic learning opportunities, create a group identity and group process, and build a sense of belonging and trust in each other, in the school community, and in the Big Picture educational process.

Essential Elements of Advisory Structure include:

- Small size (ideally, about fifteen students)
- Multi-year relationship with students
- Relationships with families and/or guardians
- Home visits
- Whole-advisory relationship-building
- Individual advisor/student relationships
- Cross-fertilization of ideas among students
- Dedicated advisory time
- Advisories set up for maximum diversity of gender, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic background, etc.
- Passion is central to learning
- Respect and responsibility
- Use of Big Picture Learning educational materials

School Culture:

School culture is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Big Picture Learning schools are small, personalized communities of learning, where students are encouraged to be leaders and where school leaders are encouraged to be visionaries. Our schools strive to create a respectful, diverse, creative, exciting, and reflective culture.

One of the things that is striking about Big Picture Learning schools is the ease with which students interact with adults. A culture of respect and equality exists between students and adults, among students, and among adults. Students are encouraged to take a leadership role in the school and student voice is valued in decision making processes.

For staff members, teamwork is a defining aspect of the culture. Principals create regular opportunities for professional development and life-long learning for their staffs. Staff members also reflect regularly and share ideas through verbal and written communication.

Essential Elements of School Culture include:

- Intense focus on school culture
- Students are comfortable talking with adults about academic and personal issues

- Verbal and written reflection shared among staff members
- Rituals (e.g. new student orientation; International Night; alumni reunions; etc.)
- Pick Me Ups (formal time to start each day as a community)
- A focus on professional development/life-long learning for staff members
- Inter-grade & across-grade student groupings
- Democratic governance
- Student leadership
- Respect and caring
- Diversity recognized and celebrated
- Clear policies and expectations for behavior
- Emphasis on reflection
- High attendance rate
- High graduation rate
- High college acceptance rate
- Low dropout rate
- Fun!

Leadership:

In Big Picture Learning schools, leadership is shared and spread between a strong, visionary principal and a dedicated, responsible team of advisors. The leadership of the school community functions as a democracy.

Principal Leadership:

All Big Picture Learning principals begin their training before their school opens through our TYBO program (The Year before Opening). This program uses current Big Picture Learning principals as mentors, as well as utilizes the expertise of the Co-Founders and Big Picture coaches. Principals are trained around Big Picture principal leadership criteria through mentor/mentee relationships with other Big Picture principals and coaches including: human relations and communication, moral courage, vision, flexibility and efficiency, life-long love of learning and leading, and recruitment.

The principals participate in on-going year-round professional development, and are supported in the start-up years of operation by Big Picture Learning. Principals also actively participate in professional development and conferences designed especially for the Big Picture network of schools. Principals are cultural/instructional leaders, as well as CEOs/entrepreneurs for their schools. They are the liaisons to districts, to Big Picture Learning, and to their own staff. Overall, the success of the whole school and, in particular, the professional health of the advisors, is the responsibility of the principal.

Advisor Leadership:

All advisors are trained by Big Picture-trained principals and supported, through the principal, by using Big Picture materials and coaching methods. Advisors take great responsibility in the day-to-day organization of the school, in the management of school time, in successful implementation of the curriculum, and finally, in the success of all students. In addition to formal professional development, advisors learn from other advisors on a daily basis by serving as each other's mentors and mentees. Much of the learning that advisors do is done through the sharing of best practices and through the collegial relationship with other advisors.

Essential Elements of School Leadership include:

- Principals trained through Big Picture coaching and through relationships with mentor principals
- Advisors and other staff members work closely with principals to adopt Big Picture distinguishers into their teaching and learning styles

Essential Leadership Roles of the Principal:

- The principal is an educational visionary, an instructional leader and manages the team of advisors in her/his school
- Within the community, the principal is the visible spokesperson for the school, the fundraiser, the political and community networker
- The principal organizes, plans, and runs regular staff development sessions, including staff meetings and retreats
- The principal supervises staff, reflects upon her/his observations of staff members in their work environments, and provides regular feedback

Essential Leadership Roles of the Advisor:

- Advisors and other staff members work in tandem with their school principal to share school leadership and management responsibilities

- Advisors and staff members have fluid relationships with each other, sharing best practices and informing each other's decisions.

Parent/Family Engagement: Adult Support

Big Picture Learning believes that parent/guardian engagement in a child's learning is essential to student success. Big Picture does not only enroll students, we enroll families – and involve them in all aspects of student learning. By bringing students out into the community and bringing the community into the school, Big Picture schools become community assets and positive, learning-rich contributors to their surrounding neighborhoods, towns, and cities.

Parents and families are essential to the success of Big Picture Learning schools from the process of start-up through day-to-day operation. Most importantly, we are intentional about engaging families in their children's education by asking them to regularly participate in learning plan meetings and attend exhibitions. Families serve as resources, providing information about their child's strengths, weaknesses, and lives outside of school. They also serve as resources to the school community by connecting the school with potential LTIs and mentors; many parents and family members serve as mentors themselves.

Families play an active role in the school community including political support of the school, participation in celebrations and social gatherings, and the support of new parents and students. They are also viewed as life-long learners who need support to learn how to play a proactive role in the school lives of their children through high school, on to college, and in the professional world.

Essential Elements of Parent/Family Engagement include:

- Families are actively involved in the education and school life of their children
- Parental voice is vital in school organization and culture
- Families attend and participate in learning plan meetings and exhibitions
- Parents are involved in recruitment and enrollment processes
- Families are engaged in the college search process
- Families play an important and proactive role in garnering political and community support for Big Picture Learning schools

School/College Partnership: College Preparation and Support

Big Picture Learning schools show deep faith in all students' abilities to make good decisions in assembling their post-high school plans. We also believe that college should be an opportunity that is available to all students if they so chose to attend. Big Picture Schools expose students to the variety of professional, academic, and social paths available

to be pursued after high school; and plan students' academic course in order to maximize students' post-high school opportunities.

Big Picture Learning believes that all students should be afforded the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education if they so chose. By developing challenging individual learning plans, organizing student visits to colleges, educating families about the college application and financial aid processes, and building relationships with local colleges, Big Picture schools are cultivating our students' readiness for the challenges of post-high school study. All Big Picture school students are required to take college entrance exams and apply to at least one college or post-secondary school program. No matter what their chosen course, Big Picture Schools require all students to develop post-high school plans that contribute to the future success of the student – be it through college, a professional internship, travel, trade school, the military, or the workforce.

Alumni of Big Picture schools are forever considered members of the school community and are throughout their post-school years to remain life-long learners. Each Big Picture school develops programs and services to work with students through the important transition from high school to post-graduate life – and beyond. Many of these programs also provide opportunities for Big Picture school alums to serve as role models or mentors to current students.

Big Picture Learning recognizes that the transition from high school to college is often a difficult one, especially for students who are the first in their families to seek post-secondary education. This transition can also be difficult for families confronting 'empty-nest syndrome' for the first time. For these reasons, Big Picture schools provide transition support for students and families and continued access to their former Big Picture school and its resources. Through this transition work and our longitudinal study, Big Picture is able to track how alumni are doing and observe trends that improve our support systems.

Essential Elements of School/College Partnership include:

- A college preparatory workload for all students
- Opportunities for students to enroll in college classes before their high school graduation
- All students develop college portfolios, including resumes and college essays
- All students take the college entrance exam
- All students apply to at least one college
- The development of alternative transcripts to translate student work in Big Picture Learning schools for colleges
- College counseling for students and families
- Building relationships with local colleges

- College visits and college fairs a school-wide endeavor
- Support in process of applying and securing funding, including the Big Picture Emergency College Fund
- Transition for newly graduated students and their families
- Continued relationships with alumni

Professional Development:

At each Big Picture school, the principal in conjunction with other Big Picture Learning staff lead professional development sessions for the school staff. This ongoing professional development takes place at staff meetings, at regular staff retreats, and conferences designed to delve deeply into various topics. Advisors and staff members participate in all Big Picture Learning professional development activities, including but not limited to: our annual Big Bang conference, conferences around specific Big Picture Learning initiatives, visits to other schools, and through conference calls.

Big Picture Online, an innovative, interactive web site, is a primary tool for the sharing of information and resources for both students and staff, greatly increasing opportunities for professional development. A major component of Big Picture Online is its use as a tool to share best practices throughout the searchable Knowledge Exchange area, in Forums to discuss and share ideas, and by creating compiled materials on particular topics.