Leadership in Charter Schools

A Case Study of Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy

The Honors Program
Senior Capstone Project
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ABSTRACT

This case study seeks to identify the leadership practices in a high performing charter school in order to determine specific practices that are effective, especially when educating minority and underprivileged students. This study is partnered with Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy (BVP), a mayoral charter school system consisting of six schools grades k-12. BVP is performing significantly statistically better than neighboring districts as well as Rhode Island schools as a whole. This research explores the leadership approaches and practices used to drive the success achieved by BVP. The data collected for this study derives from interviews with school administrators, faculty, and staff, observations of Board and Cabinet meetings, as well as various scholarly sources. The results include a strong focus on *Autonomy and Best Practices*, a *People oriented approach, Learning by doing and seeing,* and *Managing change and controversy*.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago the United States ranked number one for quantity and quality of high school graduates; now, the United States is ranked 36th (Coleman, 2015). The state of primary education in the country has largely deteriorated, but some schools, even those in underprivileged areas, are outshining others. Because schools have different requirements, different funding, and different structures, this research focuses on the leadership styles that set schools apart and drive some schools to succeed while others fail. This research was conducted via a case study method working with Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academies in Rhode Island. These schools have an urban low socio-economic status (SES), but high performing academic achievement. The purpose of the study is to provide a contextual understanding of leadership styles that have driven academic success in these schools. This research will first outline the school system used as a subject, the demographics of the schools, and recent standardized state testing results to set the narrative for the leadership practices that are driving the success of the educators and students.

Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academies

Blackstone Valley Prep (BVP) Mayoral Academy is a series of six public schools chartered by the Rhode Island Department of Education. BVP services grades k-11 in Central Falls, Cumberland, Lincoln, and Pawtucket Rhode Island. They educate about 1,600 students under the mission statement; *To prepare every scholar for success in college and in the world beyond*.

What is a Mayoral Charter Academy?

According to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), mayoral academies are:

"*Schools created by a mayor of any city or town within the State of Rhode Island, acting by or*

through a nonprofit organization (regardless of the time said the nonprofit organization is in existence) to establish a mayoral academy."

RIDE identifies mayoral charter schools by four characteristics including; autonomy, accountability, choice, and innovation. In terms of BVP, the school has more autonomy than public schools as charters do not have the same state and federal regulations. BVP has *autonomy* as they are governed by a board of directors which have constructed and developed the policies of the schools rather than receiving policy and regulations from the government. BVP is held *accountable* by maintaining, or exceeding, student achievement. If BVP fails to achieve these goals, their charter can be revoked. BVP offers a *choice* to families in the towns these schools service as a different way to educate and prepare the student. Finally, *innovation* is a predominant factor in this study as BVP is only eight years old and is consistently changing and experimenting with the way schools educate. Thus far, they have been successful.

BVP Demographics and Noteworthy Statistics

As noted in the introduction, BVP has a significant demographic of low SES status students as well as high performing student achievement. The following sections will provide further detail regarding those statistics and relevance to the overall study.

Economic background of student families

To start, 63% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, compared to the state average of 48% subsidized lunch (Black Stone Valley Prep, 2017.). In Rhode Island, to qualify for free lunch a child's family income must be lower than $15,171 (below 130% of the poverty line) and to received reduced lunch a child's family income must be below $21,590 (Rhode Island

Department of Education, 2017). This means that BVP schools are working to educate students who are mainly economically disadvantaged. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), "children from low-SES household and communities develop academic skills more slowly compared to students from higher SES groups" (American Psychological Association, 2016). On a national scale, this is important as students "in the richest neighborhoods are four grade levels ahead of children in the poorest districts" (Motoko, Cox, & Bloch, 2016, p. 1). This shows an undeniable correlation between SES and education.

However, while BVP has a high percentage of low SES students, they are meeting and/or exceeding academic averages of the state and their sending districts. This leads to the research question at the heart of this study; namely, how is this kind of success possible?

Ethnic background of student scholars

The ethnic demographics of BVP schools are also relevant to this study. According to the BVP web page, the identified ethnicities of BVP students are as follows; 50% Hispanic, 36% White, 11% Black, and 3% Asian. The makeup of BVP is drastically different than the makeup of all Rhode Island schools, in which the identification of ethnicities is 23.7% Hispanic, 60.7% White, 8% Black and 3.2% Asian. Why is this relevant? According to a

study done in the New York Times, titled *Money, Race and Success*, racial achievement gaps

are extremely predominant in the US education system. See figure 1 below.

There are large gaps between white children and their black and Hispanic classmates. The gaps are largest in places with large economic disparities.

White students   Hispanic   Black

3 grades ahead of average
2 grades ahead
1 grade ahead
About average
1 grade behind
2 grades behind
3 grades behind
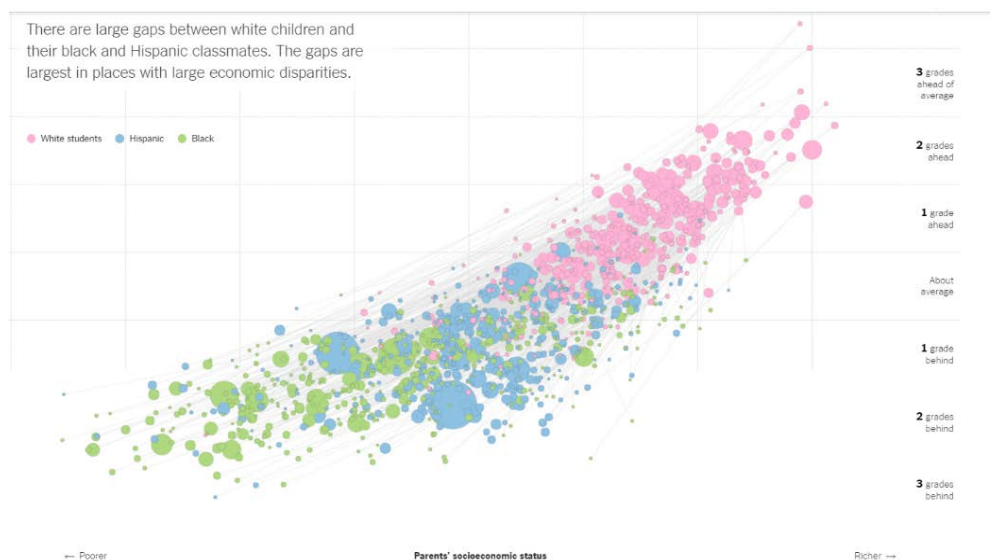
← Poorer   Parents' socioeconomic status   Richer →

Figure 1
(Motoko., Cox, A., & Bloch, M. 2016.)

It is evident in this graphic that statistical trends indicate a correlation between race and

educational development. However, BVP prides itself and brands itself as a charter school

system that is '*Diverse by Design.*' The *About* section on their homepage reads their diversity

goals as;

"Bringing together scholars from four neighboring communities allows us to create

opportunities for them to share experiences, come together in classrooms, and connect across

both racial and socioeconomic lines of difference. Valuing diversity is an organizational

priority and a core belief shared across our network" (BVP, 2017).

Statistically, the fact that BVP has a high minority makeup would imply that their six schools

would potentially be grade levels behind the national averages academically however, their

test scores and graduation rates prove otherwise.

Academic standing of BVP

BVP is meeting and/or exceeding state averages and sending district[1]averages in virtually all

areas. This is determined by looking at the

results of standardized test results such as

PARCC testing- which tests for college

readiness. According to the results of the

2016 PARCC Assessments, BVP schools

are outperforming their sending districts,

as well as the state averages, in both ELA

and Math. Figure 2 outlines the difference

in scores.

Figure 2- Blackstone Valley Prep/ Results
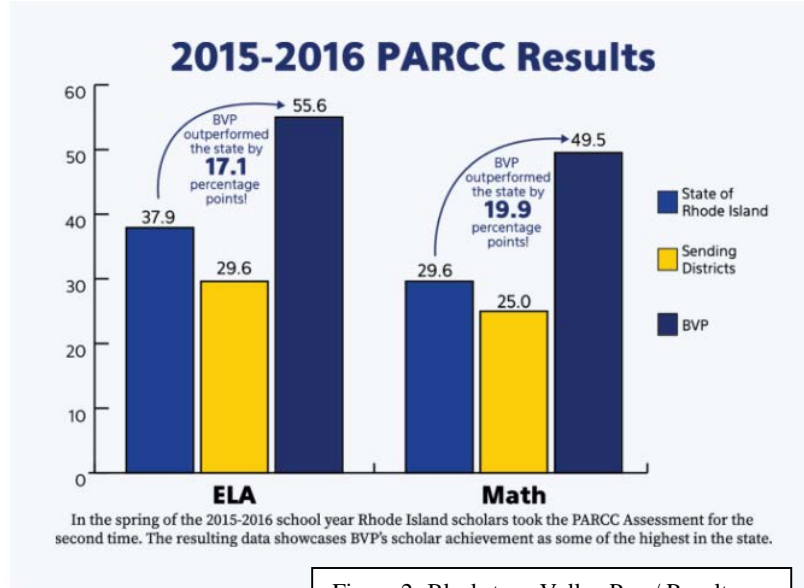
In addition to standardized testing, BVP measures favorably

in other categories of success as well. The figure 3 shows

how the schools fare in terms of attendance, stability, and

chronic absenteeism. Again in all categories, BVP has

exceeded the state average.

Relevance to the Study

It is important to outline the SES, demographics, and success

of the BVP school system for a few reasons. First, these

schools are the subject and source of data for the case study

being conducted. Second, an understanding of the schools at

Figure 3- Blackstone Valley Prep/ Results

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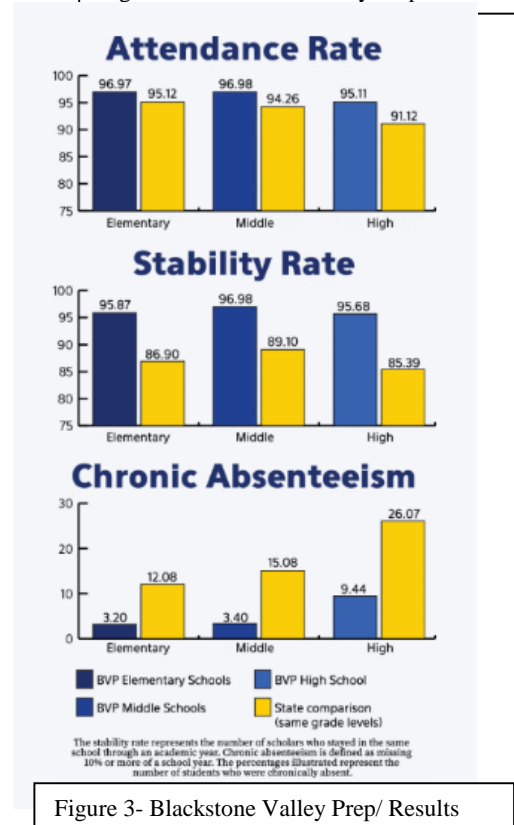
[1] Sending District- The district where students lives and commute from to attend the charter school. For BVP, their sending districts include; Pawtucket, Lincoln, Cumberland, and Central Falls, Rhode Island.

large is important in the analysis of the leadership practices in place at the schools. Finally, though the state and national statistical averages indicate students at BVP are not likely to have such high test results, yet the reality is that they are able to outperform state and sending district averages. This is the driving principle behind the purpose of the study; to understand why against the national trends, charter schools like BVP are prevailing and providing a better education for students.

RELEVANCE OF STUDY

This topic is relevant to the studies of alternative education systems because there is a 14% illiteracy rate in the United States (Crum, 2014). This topic is relevant because 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the United States every year (Miller, 2015). This topic is relevant because about 2,000 schools across the country graduate less than 60% of their students (Balfanz and Legters, 2014). This study is beneficial because, out of all of these failing school systems, there is research showing that there are numerous charter schools that are outperforming their public school counterparts. This was not the case across the board, however with the freedom and flexibility for charter schools to determine their own programs, missions, and leaders, some of these charter schools are excelling in comparison, schools like BVP. This case study is relevant because it explores key factors of charter schools that might explain why they are surpassing other schools performances. It is undertaken based on the belief that a better understanding of these factors could help other less successful schools improve the quality of the educational experience for their children.

The relevance and significance of examining leadership at charter schools are prevalent in different studies. It is important to look at the research behind what kind of schools are performing well and the impact those schools have on the students attending. For example, a study done in the *Journal of Economics Perspectives* addresses their findings on the lottery system, which is how students become enrolled in charter schools. This study investigates "what kind of students can benefit from attending charter schools, and what best practices from charter schools can be shared with others" (Chabrier, Cohodes, and Oreopoulos, 2016, p. 59). The work done in this study draws the conclusion that the "most impressive charter school effects are found where fallback schools have the least impressive academic performance" (Chabrier et. al, 2016, p. 63) or in other words, failing public schools in urban areas. This is part of the reason BVP was chosen for the study as the students attending their schools come from neighboring towns with poor education systems. Furthermore, this study was able to confirm this disparity due to their records of "[the] large positive gains from the Massachusetts studies (that) are concentrated among urban charter schools" (Chabrier et. al, 2016, p. 63). This also helps validate the relevance of BVP and their significantly higher state test scores. Furthermore, this same study draws on the variables that are consistent with academic success in charter schools and demographics. The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* found that "for urban charter schools, the coefficients reveal positive and statistically significant effects across each of the subgroups they (we) examine" (Chabrier et. al, 2016, p. 59). The foundation for conducting this study is clearly demonstrated by some of this research in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* as well as in the various studies discussed in the further sections of this research. The study done in the *Journal of Economic*

Perspectives was used as a starting point to see if what was going on in BVP was consistent with the claims being made in the journal.

METHODOLOGY

The research methods used in this study represent a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that generates theory through a systematic collection and analysis of data, rather than the deductive testing of hypotheses common to a positivist approach. It involves a systematic process in which the research develops iteratively.

The grounded theory model is appropriate for this study because "The basic idea of the grounded theory approach is to read (and re-read) a textual database… and "discover" or label variables… and their interrelationships" (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). In other words, this research method approach is appropriate for researching leadership in charter schools as it gives the freedom to collect a vast amount of data from different fields and then systematically analyze it through the use of grounded theory. Grounded theory methodology is beneficial for blending qualitative and quantitative research to find a holistic idea of the workings of the schools used in this study.

This method is used to derive themes based on the analysis of research in the literature regarding the subjects as well as the information gathered from site visits and interviews. The observations and research include primary and secondary resources, and the analysis involves the application and findings of literature in the context of BVP charter schools. By nature of the method being used, the connections between the different fields, leadership, and BVP Mayoral Academies, have become more apparent.

The use of the grounded theory method paired with the case study method enables the development of unique insights regarding the relationship of leadership in successful public charter schools. Access to meetings and interviews at BVP was granted by Jeremy Chiappetta, Executive Director BVP Mayoral Academy. All interview material was approved by the Bryant University Institutional Review Board.

While attending BVP, interviews and observations were conducted with school leaders; principals, cabinet meetings, teachers, and other school professionals. Information collected during these interactions was then transcribed and applied or compared to previous literature on the subject as well as analyzed for new findings. By conducting this type of primary research, new perspectives based on empirical observation of the day-to-day workings of a successful charter school system can be added to works regarding alternative education systems in the United States.

Using a case study for the research at BVP is beneficial for multiple reasons; first, there is evidence of ethnographic research being beneficial to learning about organizational structures. In a book titled, Know What you Don't Know: How Great Leaders Prevent Problems Before They Happen, by Michael A. Roberto, numerous successful organizational leaders are quoted stating the importance of ethnography and how experiencing research first hand is crucial to drawing productive solutions. For example, the book cites CEO of Proctor and Gamble, A.G. Lafley, stating "I don't think the answers are just in the numbers. You have to get out and look" (Roberto, 2009, p. 3). Later on, Roberto states "watching how organizations actually function(s) can be a very powerful and illuminating learning experience- and a far more accurate one" (Roberto, 2009, p. 5). This mind frame of observing leadership styles through hands-on experience can be directly tied to the study being done at

BVP Mayoral Academy. Being able to observe what is happening at these schools is a primary way to help validate and compare the research that has already been done in the field. Observing the schools adds additional content and analysis of leadership and education being used in highly successful charter schools.

FINDINGS

The findings for this project derive from using the grounded theory process. By conducting interviews, observations, and literature research, different patterns and themes emerged. The four main overarching themes that were synthesized through this study are; *Autonomy and Best Practices, a People Oriented Approach, Learning by Doing and Seeing, and Managing Change and Controversy.* Each of these themes derives from observations and interviews at the schools and are validated or compared to other research in their respective fields.

Autonomy and Best Practices

In an interview with Jeremy Chiappetta, Executive Director of BVP, he stated that one of the biggest challenges the leadership teams at BVP face is the conflict between practicing *autonomy* or implementing *best practices*. Based on school observations and school performance data, it appears that a driving force behind the success of BVP is a combination of *both* autonomy *and* best practices. These practices can be seen interwoven in the structure of the schools, the practices of teachers and leadership, and atmosphere it creates at BVP.

Autonomy

BVP is comprised of 6 schools grades k-11. All of the schools are governed by a mayor-led board of directors, currently comprised of 12 members. BVP also has a Leadership Team, or Network Support Team, which "provides strategic and administrative support" for BVP

schools (BVP, 2016). See Appendix A for a complete list of roles on the leadership team. This team works on supporting all six schools and assisting overarching goals of BVP. Each of BVP's six schools is treated as a subsidiary and generally runs independently under the direction of school deans. This is why each school and schools leaders at each school are considered autonomous. Each school has a different number and different specialties for their deans based on what each school sees fit for their own success. Because of this, the day-to-day structure, functioning, and decision making of BVP are left up to the autonomous decisions of each school individually. Though all schools have deans, each school has a different number of deans and focus for their deans. For example, Elementary School 1(ES1) has a Head of School, Dean of Academics, Dean of Culture, and Dean of Operations while Elementary School 2 (ES2) consists of a Head of School and a Dean of Academics/Culture. The schools have the freedom to determine what combination of school leaders they need and are useful for the operations of their own schools. In this case, autonomy is interwoven into the structure of the schools

Like the concept behind charter schools in general, each BVP school may operate as they wish, so long as they produce results sufficient enough to maintain their charters. This is how the board and leadership team handle each school. Because each school can be run differently, it acts like miniature experiments in which each school can have trial and error on a smaller scale before new practices are adopted by the other schools. The sharing of ideas and practices among each school is done by weekly principal walk-throughs in which the principals of each of BVP schools go on weekly visits to the other BVP locations to see what is going on at each campus. They then have the opportunity to decide if they want to try any of those practices in their own school. Having a structure like this, allows the leaders in each

school to have the freedom and flexibility to do what works for them while keeping in the strategic vision of BVP as a whole.

Autonomy is not only used for the 'higher-ups' in BVP schools. Scholars at the school are granted different forms of autonomy when they complete their work. Each scholar has his/her own educational plan based on testing done at the beginning of the year. After a lesson in class, each scholar has online work to do which derives from every scholar's individual educational plan (IEP). Once the scholar has completed a certain number of milestones from the independent work, he/she may be allowed to do work with headphones on, away from his/her desk, in a group setting, etc. this instills a sense of ownership in each scholar's work. All of the scholars understand that when they are capable of proving individual achievements, they may be granted the autonomy to conduct work in whichever way they see fit. Having the students, teachers, and school leaders all working independently or interdependently towards a greater good, has proved successful for BVP thus far.

Autonomy Research

As noted, one of the main findings in determining factors of success for BVP was the use of autonomy in schools for school leaders. Research done by the Griffith Institute for Educational Research in Australia supports the idea that this can be beneficial in a school system. One of their findings was that "[particular] versions of leadership, namely distributed leadership, have emerged within policy discoursed and are prescribed as the means for effecting school reform" (Singh and Glasswell, 2016, p. 255). Distributed leadership can be seen in the practices at BVP and helps to encourage autonomy of school leaders.

Another study done in the *International Journal of Management Reviews (IJMR)* did a review of theories and research on the topic of distributed leadership in organizations. This research

validates how schools leaders can use their own practices while working towards BVP's

common goals. In the context of the research, The Griffith Institute identified the prevalence

of distributed leadership within educational policies. Distributive leadership within

educational policy indicates that leadership does not only derive from one individual leader

but a network of leaders. Their review found that distributed leadership can be considered;

 "A shift in focus from the attributes and behaviors of individual 'leaders' to a more

systematic perspective, whereby leadership is conceived of as a collective social process

emerging through the interaction of multiple actors" (Bolden, 2011, p. 252).

The research from IJMR goes on to state that this implies "distributive leadership is not

something 'done' by an individual 'to' others, or a set of individual actions through which

people contribute to a group or organization…[it] is a group activity that works through and

within relationships, rather than individual action (Bolden, 2011, p. 253). In other words,

there are individuals operating using their own strengths, while working interdependently in a

cohesive unit. This is evident in the team style approach to leadership used at BVP as well as

in their hiring process of hiring people with a teamwork mindset. This is in line with the

different combination of leadership teams, cabinet members, and deans at each of the

respective BVP schools. It is ingrained into the framework of how this school system works,

it enables the leaders to work together to maintain accountability, as well as spearheading

continued success in their own schools.

Furthermore, an additional study titled, 'Public Charter Schools and Teacher Autonomy and

Accountability', notes "the charter school movement gives real power… to teachers to use

their skills, talents, and energy. Along with this opportunity comes responsibility- the

standardized tests and other assessments" (Oberfield, 2016.). This study also helps to look at

the management of the school in different ways. Their research on business management is analogous with research regarding autonomy in the schools. For example, the study compared public versus private managers- with private managers being analogous with leaders in a charter school and public managers being analogous with public school leaders. They found that "public managers being less able to successfully manage their organizations. (Oberfield, 2016) as they had more restrictions in place from their headquarters, similar to how public schools have more federal and state regulations.

Best Practices

Though each school has its own autonomy, there are best practices that are used across each of the six schools. One of the main best practices observed at BVP is that they are a data-driven institution. This means that BVP is constantly collecting data and statistics to determine the status of the schools' performances. They do this in order to maintain their charter, but also to enhance the education for their scholars. Some of the data they collect includes test results, student engagement, and cost expenditure per student. The leadership team and the board collect this data from each school to ensure, that regardless of their day-to-day practices, they are on track to maintain and grow their academic goals.

A second best practice observed at BVP is that all schools have a strong commitment to their mission statement; *To prepare every scholar for success in college and the world beyond.* It is evident from school observations and interviews that all goals and practices are set based on this notion. This mission statement is plastered in the halls of the schools, is written on laptop stickers, and is known by all scholars, families of scholars, and all faculty and staff. Having a mission statement is a common practice in schools and businesses alike. Though this mission

is short and simple, it serves as a guide known by all staff and students that drive the

fundamental core of how BVP operates.

Another noteworthy best practices that BVP uses, is the practice of teaching and using

formalities in their schools. These formalities include referring to all students to as 'scholars',

all scholars wearing uniforms, and all scholars shaking hands with teachers when they enter

the building at the beginning of each school day. These seem like simple and small practices,

however, according to the research on these topics, they make a big impact on the

effectiveness of their education at BVP.

Best Practices Research

The practices deemed successful for BVP were consistent with research in this field. As

identified in the observations at BVP, data is used to drive the success of the schools. A data-

driven approach is backed by various different research. One example of this is a case study

of Holyoke Community Charter School. The study found that one main best practice is

assessment data for student academic growth and engagement. Essentially they found that by

gauging and assessing student involvement, scores, and academics in general, they would be

able to teach and engage students more effectively. Having the data to determine where a

student is in the learning process enables the teachers to identify what she/he needs to do in

order to help that child progress. In other words, the "data drives instruction" where the school

leaders and teachers can use the data to act as they see fit to move forward.

Some additional best practices were noted in the research regarding BVP. For example,

having a dedication to a mission statement is rooted in research and holds value to the

organization. The study, *Benefits, Characteristics, Components, and Examples of Customer*

Oriented Mission Statements, reveals that having a customer, or scholar in BVP's case,

oriented mission statement provides direction and matters for organizational effectiveness. BVP is cognizant of this effect and the long-term effect it will have on their organization and their scholars.

BVP is also practicing formalities such as wearing uniforms and shaking hands with teachers when entering the building. This is not unique to just these schools and again is rooted in the belief that these kinds of practices with have a beneficial impact on their scholars come graduation. This is backed by further research. For example, in an ethnographic study done in Sweden, *Values education as the Daily Fostering of School Rules*, looks at teaching students to be nice and kind to others, and to understand and follow rules. This study found that these kinds of practices in schools, such as those at BVP, are accepted by a great degree, and are highly regarded by the students; so much so that "many of them are critical of some teacher behaviors and rules" if they are not in line with their practices of being 'nice and kind' to others (Thornberg, 2008, p. 53). This is the kind of etiquette BVP is aiming to foster in the scholars attending their schools. Across the board, BVP has few best practices as they value autonomy in their schools, however, the best practices they do implement are rooted in evidence and results of their own experiences.

People Oriented Approach

When BVP was founded, a mission statement was established; *To prepare every student for success in college and the world beyond*. This mission statement is the guiding principle behind nearly everything done at BVP. It is the foundation of day-to-day practices, as well as day-to-day interactions. With a clear focus on this mission, BVP puts scholars at the top of

their priority list; as they should. Not only does BVP focus on the preparation of the students,

but they also have a team oriented approach in their leadership practices. This section will

outline how the student focus is mirrored and developed through faculty and staff culture.

Student/Scholar Focus

As aforementioned in *Best Practices*, all students are referred to as scholars, they wear

uniforms, and they shake hands with a greeting team when they enter school in the morning.

All of these components of BVP are done by design. They are subtle preparations for *college*

and the world beyond. In addition, BVP also continuously reminds scholars of their mission

statement in various ways. They have homerooms that scholars check into every morning that

are named after a college or university- usually an alma mater of the teacher assigned to that

room. To ensure that the small day-to-day practices they are doing are actually making a

difference, they collect data from their students' activity and achievement to continuously

make progress and prepare the scholars. For example, in a recent survey sent out to the junior

class, who are starting to form lists of universities they wish to attend on Naviance, they were

asked how they heard about each particular institution. Across the board, the most common

answer received was that the institution was the name of their homeroom classroom.

Furthermore, BVP openly and deliberately recognizes the diversity and demographics of its

schools. As the six schools are comprised of 64% minority students and 63% low SES

students, they openly recognize that one of their main focuses is to close the achievement gap

of their academic achievement. For example, when the Executive Director of schools was

tweeting about schools staying open on a snowy day, he remarked; "*Get moving early to be*

able to take time and drive carefully today. We have important achievement gap closing to

do!" By outwardly recognizing goals for scholars and the school as a whole, students better understand the expectations of their performance.

Team Oriented Approach

This deliberate student focus is cultivated by the leadership teams and teacher operating each of BVP's schools. This team-oriented approach starts from the very beginning; the hiring process of BVP employees. In an interview with Chiappetta, he noted that leadership is chosen in the schools mostly by recommendation. The reason BVP takes recommendations so seriously is due to the unique culture they have among school leaders. Since BVP is a young, experimental charter school, a certain mindset is required to be successful in the schools. In

addition, BVP has longer workdays of 9 hours and significantly lower salary expenditure per teacher. For example, an average salary for a teacher at BVP is $41,892 while the average salary of an elementary school teacher in Rhode Island is $71,133 (Start Class, 2017.) See figure 4 for the comparison of average teacher salaries.
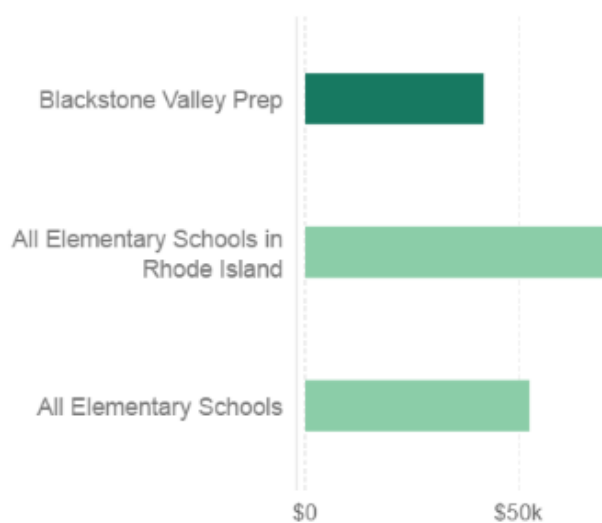

Figure 4
Start Class, 2017

In addition, BVP currently has a 9 hour work day versus the average 8 hour paid work day. Therefore, BVP has to carefully select people who are motivated by their mission statement and believe in the practices that BVP is using. Those who are inclined to volunteer or are recommended to be on a leadership team, are stipend for their extra efforts. Teacher turnover is currently an issue for BVP as they have a 70% retention rate across schools from last schools, but some schools had turnover rates as high as 65% in Middle School 1 and 100% at Elementary School 3 in the 2015-2016 school year. Their stated retention goal is 85% and is one of their top priorities right now. Notably, BVP has a very young staff with 26% of their teachers within their first or second year of teaching compared to Rhode Island, who has on whole 3% of teachers in their first or second year of teaching. Chiappetta reflects that in exit interviews of teachers leaving the school, many of them do not stay long due to outside factors related to their young ages such as moving to a new part of the country, starting a family, or going back to school full time. Though there are a young staff and high turnover,

there is a significantly lower rate of teacher absenteeism in the schools. For example, in their elementary schools, they only have a 9% absenteeism rate compared to 38% in Rhode Island and 23% in the US (Start Class, 2017). See figure 5 for the comparison of teacher absenteeism. Although there's high turnover, these statistics show the dedication of the teachers at BVP. In
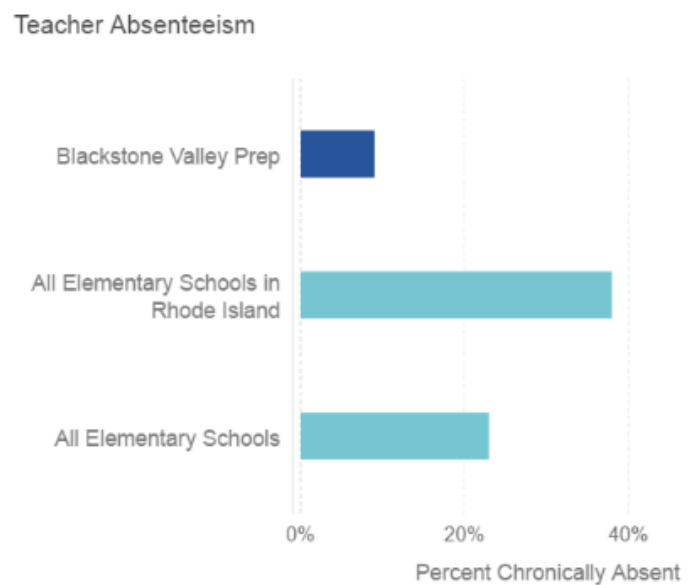

Teacher Absenteeism

Figure 5
Start Class 2017

addition, the statistics of BVP test results outperforming the state and sending districts show that the systems of leadership at BVP are succeeding in their educational goals regardless of lesser pay, longer work days, and higher turnover.

The BVP Way

To ensure *all* team members are on board with the BVP way, the same practices used for students, of preparing *every* scholar, is used for leadership teams. This was evident in observations of team, board, and cabinet meetings. In the same way that every scholar is prepared for college and the world beyond, every leader in BVP has a voice and an opportunity to speak. In the schools, each morning is started with a morning huddle where all teachers, deans of schools, and principals get on the same page. This is done differently by each school. One school may have teachers one-by-one say what they are working on, what they are proud of, something good they saw the day before, etc; anything to get group energy synced together. Cabinet meetings are started by doing a 'whip around,' or going around the table saying what their focus during that particular meeting would be. Board meetings are run using Robert's Rule, which allows structured time for all board members and the general public to have allotted time to speak.

In more intimate meetings when decisions are being made, the leader of the meeting will pause and ask by a show of thumbs up or down if the meeting attendees agreed, disagreed, or were unsure. Meetings ended with a five finger scale of how effective they felt the meeting was. These small, but intentional efforts to build team morale make up some of the reasons the leadership teams and teachers are so effective, produce strong test results and have low absentee rates.

When asked in an interview "How do you sustain being a high performing school?"

Chiappetta responded,

"*It's really hard, so we focus on the mission. We also focus on the little things, like relationships. That's important. Caring, engaging... we focus on prioritizing. This is a people organization, so the people must be a priority. We are on point with technology, but it's really about the people.*"

This is where the people/team oriented approach became a common theme among the success of BVP. It is evident in their day-to-day practices that their focus on mission and on making sure their people are focused on the same mission, enable them to pursue their big picture strategic goals. The focus on people cultivates an environment where there is sound structure, but there is freedom of idea sharing and constant iteration and growth among the BVP teams and scholars.

People Oriented Approach Research

Different aspects of the people-oriented approach observed at BVP is supported by research in the field. One of the first studies that support this claim is a study done in the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* provides evidence that supports this approach. This study ties in the use of diversity, and "strength-based" teaching practices together. This is evident regarding how BVP creates Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for each scholar based on their strengths and test scores to help them learn at their own pace while also managing barriers such as ESL or having parents without degrees. This journal article explores 'appreciative leadership' and "the role it [this] plays in organizational innovation and transformation" (Orr and Cleveland-Innes, 2015, p. 235). Essentially, appreciative leadership helps notice the 'uniqueness' of students and 'their situations' (Orr

and Cleveland-Innes, 2015, p.241) and uses that to determine a course of action to prepare the scholar for success.

In addition, BVP purposely uses selective exposure theory to help scholars who may not have exposure to the world of academia in their homes. Selective exposure theory is defined in the study, *Selective Exposure, and Information Quantity*, as a preference for information that is consistent with one's prior decision of information. Essentially, when BVP uses tactics like naming homerooms after colleges and universities, they are 'exposing' the scholars to the idea of how universities can be a part of their lives. Furthermore, this study looked at how when having more options, people had a 'preference for consistent information" (Fischer, 2008, p. 231). This is in line with how BVP's junior class reported their college preference lists were inspired by their homerooms as lowerclassmen.

As noted in the observations and interviews, behavioral interviewing to ensure team mentality is a vital component to the success of BVP running effectively. There are good reasons behind this. One is that behavioral interviewing has proven to be an effective method of hiring and, on a broader scale, associated with having strategic vision. This is evident in a study done by Deakin University School of Education titled, *Collaborative Practice in School Improvements*. They conducted studies through interviews with teachers and principals. During the interviews, the researchers "included visual maps of patterns decision-making and the enactment of ideas" (Rawolle, Wells, Paatsch, Tytler, & Campbell, 2016). Using these models as well as data from the interviews, the study drew on information pertaining to the impact of leadership in a local context and how this can help improve practices in the educational environment as a whole. The study found that among the educational leaders, there was a disparity of viewing their school's leadership model with 'overt resistance' to

feeling as though there was a 'renewed collaborative practice.' This meant that when the

researchers interviewed those who worked at the schools, they had different perceptions of the

leadership model implemented. This is a reason BVP makes their mission and their strategies

so widely known. During all observations, all school leaders were on the same page with the

structure of their organization. When asking school leaders if they understood and valued the

school leadership styles, they all agreed. Though this is different than the results of the Deakin

University study, both show the importance of getting on board with the vision of their

organization.

To take this a step further, BVP works to ensure school leaders have their voices heard. There

are various studies which show that appreciation and recognition go a long way in the

workplace and in meetings. One book, Looking Forward to Monday Morning by Diane

Hodges, notes that appreciation and recognition "promote a positive environment and inspire

staff members" (2002, p. 2). BVP leaders incorporate these tactics into their leadership, board,

and cabinet meetings by having checkpoints, whip around, or visual aids to express that all

members are in agreement with what is going on with planning.

Learning by Seeing and Doing

BVP is an eight-year-old Mayoral charter school; this means it is still experimental by nature.

The school has the flexibility and freedom to develop their own programs, missions, and

leaders in the ways that they see fit. Based on the statistics reported earlier, it is clear that

BVP is achieving academic success, but this is not done by chance. This is done by a strategic

design thinking process in which ideas and processes are prototyped, tested, analyzed, and

tested again. BVP uses a hands-on approach, paired with statistical data and evidence to validate that what they are doing in their schools is working.

Design Thinking

BVP uses a method of planning and innovation called design thinking. The design thinking process is used by designers and engineers to problem solve. BVP uses this system among their leadership teams to generate ideas and creative vision for the strategic planning and process implementation used in their schools. The process of design thinking includes idea generation, prototyping, and testing ideas to constantly iterate and refine the solutions and make them the best version that they can be. As a charter school, BVP has the freedom and flexibility to use this kind of process in their management. Since BVP itself is an experimental school, the leaders there use this process in their meetings to come up with new and innovative ways to educate scholars. Many of those ideas are described throughout this literature.

School walkthroughs

Since all six of BVP schools run their day-to-day operations fairly autonomously, there are pros and cons at each school. As BVP has a focused mission statement and ambitious goals for each student, idea sharing among schools is vitally important information. In order to share ideas, principals have weekly walk-throughs at each of the six school locations. There are a variety of quantitative and qualitative measures taken to make the most effective use of these walkthroughs.

Qualitatively, principals can see the different ways in which teachers and school leaders cultivate the learning environment. One practice that was shared from one school to another was playing music in the morning when students are walking in and shaking hands with the

greeting teams. This is a small and simple change, but it boosts the morale of students coming in, teaches them to greet people with respect, and is a signal to the start of their school day. Another qualitative share that was made through these walkthroughs was energy levels and 'shout outs' during morning huddles for teachers. For example, one BVP school had very high energy morning huddles where they would rapid fire call out good deeds they saw other teachers doing recently. Another school had far more formal morning huddles where they went over agendas and logistics of trips. By observing each other's practices, the schools were able to create a hybrid of efficient information sharing, but with high energy and feel good tactics used to start the day of with a more positive mentality.

Quantitative metrics are also used during these walkthroughs to ensure that the practices happening at the schools have a beneficial impact on the students. One example of this is gauging student engagement. A recent tweet from a BVP twitter account read; "@bvprep MS1 (middle school 1) walk thru today 108/112 SS (silent study) engaged in learning. Not 100% yet, but 96.5% is almost body temp!" Again openly recognizing the goals and success of the school, while using quantitative means of measuring if the practices of that school are effective.

Uncommon schools

In addition to information sharing between BVP schools, the leadership teams also look at 'uncommon schools' to see what some of their best practices are in order to better their own school. This starts with networking with other charter schools in the area for more hands-on learning experiences, as well as reading about well-known schools such as Excellence Boys Charter School, Achievement First, and Summit Schools, just to name a few. Using other experimental charter schools and their success to implement at BVP has been a common

practice for leadership at BVP. It is taking a culmination of best practices from successful schools and using them to breed further success for BVP.

Further research outlines the effectiveness of a hands-on learning approach. For BVP having the most effective methods of educating and breeding well-rounded students is the heart of their mission statement.

Learning by Doing and Seeing Research

As noted, learning by doing and seeing helps drive the success of BVP. These studies show the significance of how using new approaches to develop their schools, as well as looking at what other schools are doing, can help aid the progress of BVP. This concept is not limited to just BVP, but is a practice that can be used by any school or entity that wishes to take the time to improve their development as an organization.

First, design thinking is becoming a more widely used practice among businesses and schools, BVP is not exempt from this. The benefit of participating in this practice is that design thinking "has been incorporated into the school environment as a way to devise more effective professional development and class schedules, and student-entered classroom spaces" (Coleman, 2016, p. 62). Design thinking is also identified as an "approach that could create (such) solutions, and contribute to strategic sustainable development" (Shapira H., Ketchie A., & Nehe M, 2017). BVP uses these methods to create innovative ways to prepare students for college and their futures. It is an alternative to a classic approach to education, just as charter schools are an alternative form of schooling for the public; in other words, design thinking principles are consistent with the basis of principles which BVP was founded on.

Second, other charter schools are also using unconventional methods of education and succeeding at them. BVP looked other school's practices in the pursuit of improving their

own educational methods. This approach is not new in the field of educational research. Other charter schools and other researchers look to other charter, private and public schools to find out how their education experiments fared with the hopes of educating students. This was done in the aforementioned study done by the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. These researchers wanted to answer the question of how some schools were performing so well compared to their counterparts. The article then goes on to explore some of the charter schools that were performing statistically better than other schools in their areas. These studies looked at schools such as KIPP, Lynn, UP Academy, and the Promise Academy and what they are doing differently to make such significant improvements for the students. One of the common threads that they discovered in their research was that each of these schools had a "No Excuses" policy that has proven record to improve student performance (Chabrier et. al, 2016). The "No Excuses" policy tied in various facets of leadership skills and looks different for each set of demographics by stating that, regardless of students SES or race, they are expected to show high performance in education and test results; In other words, there is 'no excuse' as to why they should not perform well. Different students are dealing with different adversity, and these successful charter schools are pooling together leadership styles in order to plan on how to manage the challenges that impact education.

There are many instances in this study that are related to the findings in the case study with BVP. First, BVP uses the practice of looking at what other successful schools are doing, like the other charter schools mentioned above. BVP uses this tactic to find out what other charters are doing that is working for them that BVP could apply to their own schools. Not only do they look to other schools, but they look within their own six schools to see what kind of practices are most effective.

In addition, BVP also started with a "no excuses' policy and then switched to more of a focus on their mission statement; *To prepare every scholar for success in college and the world beyond*. These mottos essentially mean the same thing; all scholars will be educated well and prepared for their next endeavors by the time they leave the BVP school systems.

Managing Change and Controversy

There is no entity of success without controversy and change; BVP is no exception. In general, charter schooling is a controversial topic in politics and media. BVP has to manage public relations issues, as well as communication and challenges with scholars and their families. There are a few different ways BVP handles these situations. In terms of managing change, BVP stays up to date with legislation, funding, and sensitive issues. In terms of handling controversy, BVP uses their facts, figures, and support systems to determine their course of action.

Managing Change

Schools are faced with the challenge of educating students to be prepared for the 'real world.' They are constantly faced with the dilemma of airing on the side of caution with sensitive information or being direct and teaching current events that may be controversial. BVP also has this dilemma. In order to honor their mission statement, they make the decision to be cutting edge and diverse in their methods of schooling. For example, BVP decided to include the story of Jazz Jennings, a young transgender girl, in a 'Courageous Kids' campaign in their elementary schools. This caused some controversy with parents who felt it was not the school's place to discuss sexuality in the classroom. BVP has a diverse student body and wanted to remain loyal to their *diversity by design* initiative and go ahead and teach the

program. In addition, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) states that in

Sexuality Education it can;

Include(s) human growth and development; personal skills; relationships; disease control and prevention; sexual health and behavior; family life; and societal and cultural issues. Sexuality is complex and it encompasses emotional, physical and social changes and factors. It includes gender, gender identity, body image, and sexual orientation.

Not all schools would take the risk to educate on these matters, however BVP, in line with state ruling, decided this was worthwhile to teach their scholars. Teaching current events, even when controversial, are part of the success of the school.

Other ways in which BVP manages change is by being prepared and proactive. For example, at the most recent board meeting, the topic of President Trump's 'skinny budget' proposed for schools was brought up. The head of finance stated that she and her team already had made plans and budgets just in case the new legislation should be implemented and BVP's budget would change. In this case, preparedness is key.

There are also systems in place to manage change. As mentioned, at board meetings, Robert's Rule is used to run the meeting. This is where large-scale decisions are made after the recommendation of a cabinet member, discussion among the board, and a formal vote. All decisions are backed with data, information, and the approval of the mayor. These decisions are made publically and formally to show the dedication and significance of the decisions that impact the scholars' education.

Managing Controversy

One of the main ways BVP manages controversy is by being as transparent as possible. During one controversy in 2016, students had hacked into teacher computers and found

emails speaking unprofessionally and negatively about students at the school. BVP responded

by having some staff members step down as well as a formal apology letter to the public and

the families affected from the executive directors of schools.

In addition, during board meetings, there is a time period when public voice is allowed to be

heard. Parents and members of the public are allowed to speak on any matter in whichever

way they chose. BVP takes on these conversations publically during the meetings. They

gather feedback and inputs, yet keep in mind their mission and goals of education.

In response, BVP strives to create policies that are the most beneficial for the scholars they

are educating. In addition, BVP publically forms relationships with other neighboring charter

schools to show solidarity and strength in the faith in the way they are educating. By having a

firm confidence in their practices, BVP is able to handle controversy in an open and effective

manner.

Managing Change and Controversy Research

Managing change and controversy is a vital component of running any organization; it is

especially significant in the leadership practices of BVP. As noted in the case study

conducted, BVP prides themselves in being 'diverse by design.' They do this by the makeup

of their student body, faculty, and staff, but also through the material they are teaching in their

schools. Teaching current events has been proven to be an important part of education. For

example, a study done by the *National Council for Social Studies*, identifies "teaching current

events is integral to their professional obligation" for teachers and school leaders (Hass &

Laughlin, 2000, p. 15). Furthermore, teaching current events that may be considered

controversial, such as the case of BVP teaching about Jazz Jennings, may also have benefits

for scholars. For example, another study regarding teaching controversy in the classroom

states "teaching critical-thinking skills complements the movement of many honors programs toward teaching more than just disciplinary content" (2016, Cargas, p. 123). In addition, when considering the lasting impact of this style of education, the study also found, "Employer surveys suggest that what they want from college graduates is not people with specific knowledge but rather people who have skills in communication and critical thinking" (2016, Cargas, p. 137). This is in line with BVP's mission statement of preparation beyond the scholar's years as scholars at BVP.

The research regarding BVP states that they are unapologetically diverse by design and will continue to pride themselves in their cutting-edge education. They communicate their branding and major changes with parents, as well as basic information about classroom happenings. Interestingly, this is backed by research that focuses on communication with mostly Hispanic parents of elementary students. The results of this study found that "both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents expected to work with their students on academics at home and wanted information from their child's school about supporting academics at home." (2015, Hoffman, Podikunju-Hussain, & Ridout, p. 8). In addition, the Hispanic parents wanted more information about school readiness skills that they could help their children with at home (2015, Hoffman, et. al., p.10) This is especially important research for BVP as it is comprised of mostly minority students, most of whom are Hispanic. Understanding that the parents of their scholars are eager to help with academics, as well as school readiness, is important. Based on this research and observations of schools, BVP should continue to teach current, even controversial events, and maintain the transparency of communication with the parents of the scholars attending their school.

CONCLUSION OF STUDY

Limitations

This research was conducted via case study method, therefore, it is narrow in scope of research in the entire field of education. Though it provided an in-depth look at the leadership practices of a highly successful series of charter schools, it is limited to the practices of Black Stone Valley Prep. Given more time and/or resources, looking at other schools would be beneficial for adding to research in this field of study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the findings and limitations of this study, there are a few recommendations for future research. On recommendation is to use the research conducted in this study to create a new policy or policy reform. This kind of future project would enable the research done in this study to be put to use in a tangible way.

Further recommendations for research include looking at more than just one school system as well as considering disparities and similarities between public, private and charter schools. This kind of study would delve further into the benefits and restrictions of different policies and how they play out in the operations of the different schools.

Closing Thoughts

So what does this all mean? As we struggle as a nation to have an education system that equally prepares all students, it is important to consider the schools that have achieved success in educating their students. Charter schools provide an interesting perspective on the education of America's youth as they have the freedom and flexibility to operate their organization as they see fit. It is vital to learn from the different practices that appear to be beneficial to the education of future generations.

It is important to look at schools like BVP as a standard for what schools should be doing. They should blend autonomy and best practices, they should remain people oriented, they should continuously learn by going out and doing and seeing innovative ways to educate and they should stay on top of managing change and controversy. These themes work for BVP and they can work for other schools, private, public, and/or charter to help improve education in the United States.

Though education is widely debated, it is undeniable that it is important. Therefore, continuous studies of education and leadership are imperative to add to the field as it has a direct impact on future generations of the United States and the rest of the world. Though this study was done on a small scale, it has large implications for the bigger picture of education as a whole. There are various different facets of education and leadership structures and practices play an important role in that. The work being done at BVP is valuable and can serve as a model for other schools looking to improve their overall achievement.

Appendix A – (Leadership Team makeup of Schools)

ES1 (~400 kids): Head of School, Dean of Academics, Dean of Culture, Dean of Operations
ES2 (~400 kids): Head of School, Dean of Academics and Culture (2), Dean of Operations
ES3 (~100 kids): Head of School, Dean of Academics and Culture
MS1 (~320 kids): Head of School, Dean of Academics, Dean of Culture, Dean of Operations
MS2 (~80 kids): Head of School, Dean of Academics and Culture
HS (~240 kids): Head of School, Dean of Academics and Culture (2), Dean of Culture (1), Dean of College and Careers

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