



ACHIEVING THE UNTHINKABLE

*How a high school steadfastly and
robustly supports all students as they earn
both a traditional and vocational degree
—in four years*

**Blackstone Valley Regional
Vocational Technical High School**

Upton, Massachusetts



Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
The Learning Company™

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Practices
Network

ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association, have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K–12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

INTRODUCTION

All students who attend Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School in Massachusetts graduate with a traditional high school degree and at least one vocational/technical degree. With a 193-day school year, as opposed to the typical 180 days, these students complete traditional high school requirements in just over half the time of that of their peers in traditional high schools.

As a school that is home to 191 students with 504s and IEPs, how is it possible to support every student so effectively that, despite the unusually rigorous pace, 100% of its 1,218 students graduate after four years with their next step planned, including 83.5% of whom are set to begin two- or four-year college? How is it possible that since 2004, 100% of its students have passed the state mandated MCAS test, with all of the students in the most recent graduating class having scored Advanced or Proficient on MCAS ELA and 95% having scored Advanced or Proficient on both the Math and Science MCAS? It is possible thanks to a team of educators who define Blackstone Valley Tech as a school that belongs to the students, not to them; and who define their role as working not for leadership, not for the board, but for students. It's possible thanks to a team that will do whatever possible to support every last student as they move through a rigorous vocational curriculum blended with an equally rigorous and relevant traditional high school education.

THE CHALLENGE

What does it take to prepare students for successful careers with longevity and successful lives in general? What does it *really* take? The leaders, teachers, and support staff of Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School (BVT) in Upton, Massachusetts ask themselves this question every day. To them, matriculating students who can adjust smoothly to the working world and adult life goes beyond merely connecting learning to careers when possible. It goes beyond opportunities now and then to learn the latest in vocations or jobs. It goes beyond rigorous academics and current technology skills. To the team at BVT, helping every student who passes through their school obtain the greatest likelihood for long, fruitful careers—including college or not—is an all-encompassing proposition that speaks to the whole child.

When BVT opened its doors in 1964, it successfully sought to offer an exciting and rewarding career and technical education to students from thirteen surrounding districts. The school became known as one where the team would go above and beyond to meet all student needs, whatever they were, and provide for all students all possibilities for a successful future.

This commitment to students confronted a new challenge in the mid 1990s, when the state of Massachusetts—an early adopter of the standardized state test—rolled out the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) testing requirements. Vocational schools like BVT were faced with a choice: fight for a different kind of assessment (risking further distancing students from the option of college) or adapt curriculum to accommodate the academics necessary to prepare students for MCAS tests.

BVT made a bold decision—to pursue dual instructional tracts to meet technical/vocational degree requirements *and* academic/testing requirements so that all students graduate with two degrees. They

made this bold decision because they were already making any and all decisions based on what was best for their students' futures. The introduction of the MCAS meant that Massachusetts students who pass the tests would gain an advantage—and one that BVT could not justify denying their students. In deciding to prepare their students for state tests, BVT was one of the first vocational schools to break down the expectation that you had to go to a trade school to learn a trade or a traditional high school to go to college.

Leadership at BVT recognized the magnitude of this leading edge decision. If they were going to ask of all students to, in effect, do twice the amount of work in the same amount of time, they were going to have to double down on their commitment to doing whatever possible to support every last student. They were going to have to find a way to motivate all students to rise to enormously high expectations without getting burned out or overwhelmed. They were going to have to adapt expectations placed on teachers. They were going to have to expand efforts to make sure students truly believed that whatever they need to succeed in such a rigorous learning environment would be provided. The nature of this promise has grown only more complex as the issues facing our children have also grown in complexity and the demands of careers in the 21st century have grown more multifaceted.

Yet, nearly twenty years after changing their school to prepare students for MCAS and give them every advantage and opportunity, BVT leads the state not only in this original intent to provide a cutting edge vocational education. It also leads in its extraordinary capacity to meet all needs for all students as they also achieve high levels of academic success and, should they choose, go onto college and establish long, successful careers of their choosing.

THE INNOVATION

If you were to visit BVT, a student would likely greet you with much respect and professionalism. She would show concern for your needs and comfort. She would ask if she could help you find anything. She would do this with an almost stunning degree of confidence and ease. If a BVT student were to guide you through the building, he could point to projects, like a room renovation or HVAC repair, he worked on. You would hear passion and pride in his voice as he discussed the school, as if he were talking about something that was his own.

Simply put, being on BVT's campus is different. It does not feel like a typical high school, and its students don't act like typical high school students—and this is by design. It feels more like a professional environment, one that is warm and welcoming, not cold or exclusive. BVT's culture is strong and embodied by both staff and students. To cultivate, promote, and protect such a carefully crafted and unique culture, leadership is guided by four key beliefs that serve as the foundation to all decisions. And all decisions are made with the people they view themselves as working for—the students—in mind.

The School Belongs to the Students

Students at BVT don't merely own their learning; they feel ownership over the entire school. This stems from leadership's intense belief that a school should belong to its students, as it exists to provide for their needs and futures. Yet there is also a utility in promoting this belief amongst staff and students: It fosters in students a sense of pride thanks to both the responsibility entrusted to them to take care of their school and the awareness that they, as individuals, play a role in the school's success. It also fosters high

expectations among staff; if staff is going to raise the bar for students, it is only reasonable for students to do the same for teachers. The net effect is a school where everyone feels responsible to everyone else. Everyone, including students, is united in the shared goal of ensuring all students succeed in all their years at BVT and leave ready for continued success in the path of their choice.

How this sense of student school ownership is achieved is a multipronged. The school's principal (who also serves as the assistant superintendent) recognizes that it won't work if he tells students, "This is my school, keep it clean." To help students feel passionate about maintaining the integrity of the brick and mortar building, students are routinely asked to make a literal contribution to it. Based on the task at hand, students are often asked to repair something in the school or build something for a classroom based on their vocational studies. Students can point to their work and say, "I built this," or "I fixed that," which in turns creates a commitment to take care of it. They can't make this kind of impact without also taking care of their tools and their workspaces—for themselves and their peers.

In turn, there's respect for the space and things in it. Yet ownership of the school extends to the spirit and reputation of the school, as well. The principal is often heard telling students, "It's not the brick and mortar that makes Valley Tech great, it's the people within it. Our reputation is only as good as what we've accomplished today and what we intend to do tomorrow. It's important that we work our hardest at all times because we earn our reputation by the hour." This value breeds respect, too, for self and each other—from student to student, from leadership and teachers to students, and from students to teachers and leadership.

Anticipate as Many Needs as Possible, and Respond to Those You Cannot

Those who thrive at BVT are motivated by the profound power of watching their efforts change lives. This happens often at BVT because the entire team is focused on anticipating student needs and, where they can't, responding to them. This commitment has an inspiring and galvanizing effect—on an ongoing basis, it leads to the development of new programs and supports that help remove roadblocks and ensure full potential is unleashed in every student.

Per the superintendent: "We want our students to have a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment. We believe it is our responsibility to provide students with whatever they need to be successful." And according to the principal, "The school belongs to the students, and we work for them with an above-and-beyond expectation." These two sentiments get to the heart of BVT's promise to students—meeting each and every student need so that upon graduation each student is ready to thrive in all that comes next.

One of those needs, leadership observed, was reducing school time lost to health issues and medical appointments. In typical BVT fashion, the school came up with a truly innovative solution. On site, the school has a medical center that functions as an annex of Milford Regional Medical Center, a local hospital. Hospital practitioners join the school nurses at the campus annex to serve student health needs. The larger and broader staff allows for more and a wider range of services. Parents can opt to enroll their students in the health center's healthcare plan, and students can go to the center for anything for which one could go to a nurse practitioner. As needed, nurses can refer students to specialists. This has dramatically reduced the number of dismissals and absences among students. It's also more convenient for parents, who no longer have to shuttle their kids to and from doctor's appointments.

The center's benefit extends beyond student healthcare needs. Athletes can get required physicals at the site. And nursing students can get the healthcare testing required before doing clinical work in nursing homes as part of their curriculum. The center also has practitioners who offer psychological services and an on-site nutritionist.

The leadership team is actively involved in the lives of students and proactively works to figure out students' needs and provide supports and interventions before circumstances deteriorate. Yet despite this effort, leadership acknowledges they cannot predict every need. In such cases, their job is to respond to them. Case in point in rising to this challenge is the Extended Leave Room. This room, also referred to as the Transitional Room, was created in response to a student who broke her leg and missed several days of school. The student was struggling to transition back into school. The BVT team naturally saw this as an unmet need. With student help, they converted a science storage space into the room where this student—and any students returning from time away from school—could work with a social worker to ease back into schoolwork.

Everyone at BVT is welcome to share ideas to meet needs, and this includes staff needs. An example is the teacher induction program, which offers specific training and activities for new teachers in their first three years. The program was created by a teacher who was inspired to help others after struggling through her first years of teaching. She and her co-coordinator envisioned a program that provided mentorship until new educators reach professional status. The program strives to help teachers learn about the students and communities they serve, effective instructional practices, and ways to balance their professional responsibilities.

Students also know they can voice needs and expect them to be taken seriously. Time and time again, a resource or club was born of student desire and brought to fruition with staff support.

The commitment to putting all students' needs first is fierce at BVT. Protecting it means leadership has to recruit carefully and, as needed, make tough personnel decisions. If everyone on the BVT team is going to make good on its promise to do whatever possible to support every last student, then change is going to be the constant. Those who thrive at BVT are those who are comfortable with change and willing to change anything and everything if it's best for students. Thus, leadership recognizes that those who don't fit these high expectations will be better suited in a different environment. Leadership sees difficult personnel decisions as part of their commitment to students.

Preparing Students for Careers Is Just as Much About the Environment as the Learning

What does it *really* take to prepare students for successful careers with longevity and successful lives in general? To the educators at BVT, it takes replicating the professional environment as authentically as possible on campus. To tell students what professional environments look like is insufficient. Instead, the entire team shows students what working in a professional environment is like by creating for students a career immersion experience every single day at school.

All interactions at BVT are expected to be professional and polite. Given the technical education at BVT, professionals from the community are often seen around school. Students are well trained to be courteous to every person they meet on campus as any person could be a potential employer. Everyone

who works at BVT takes care to treat their colleagues professionally as well, aware that their job includes modeling for students what a respectful work environment looks like. Exchanges between teachers and students and students and students are respectful and professional. Like employees, all students are expected to engage in work, contribute ideas, collaborate, and help their peers when needed.

Behavioral expectations are based on what would be expected in a work environment. Given that so much of the work is collaborative, students—like employees—recognize that their contribution doesn't only impact their success; it also impacts that of their classmates. The same is true of safety; many technical classes require use of machinery, and students are aware that it is their responsibility to ensure safe use to protect themselves and their peers. Students feel a genuine responsibility for their own safety and that of others—a level of responsibility expected of them that serves to boost their confidence and pride in themselves and their school.

Discipline is always viewed in a professional context. Where many schools approach discipline from the standpoint of seeking to control students, BVT approaches it from the standpoint of helping students develop skills expected at work. Educators at BVT hold a belief that students make mistakes and the consequences should not impede their academic or vocational progress. Instead of stigmatizing or punishing a student who made a disciplinary mistake, an educator discusses with the student why such a mistake would be to their detriment in a career and how they can work to establish new, productive behaviors in its place. Disciplinary measures are taken at BVT, but only if a student lapses in meeting expectations to act, speak, or dress like a professional.

The replication of a professional environment goes beyond interactions. Where appropriate and possible, BVT seeks to simulate certain work environments as accurately as possible. In addition to numerous shop workspaces, BVT recently partnered with CVS to bring a pharmacy on site. Nursing students now have access to an authentic CVS pharmacy with instruction provided by CVS pharmacists. (Medications used are not real.)

The CVS collaboration was the result of the school's commitment to fostering and maintaining strong relationships with the professional community. Thanks to these partnerships, local professionals and businesses are regularly upgrading or donating equipment to maintain the authenticity and relevance of all vocational classrooms and curricula.

Normalize Support Services

The pace is rigorous at BVT; since all students are pursuing both a traditional high school degree and a vocational degree, they are doing double the amount of work as the average high school student in the same amount of time. This rigor places supreme importance not only on the presence of robust support services, but also on the normalization of them. The BVT team goes to great lengths to make sure every student feels comfortable, safe, and normal using any and all support services, no matter the reason.

One of the ways students are instantly familiarized with the notion of support is through the student mentorship program. Students are on a rotational curriculum schedule: they spend one week in academic classes, then the next in vocational classes, alternating each week. Freshmen and juniors share a rotation, and sophomores and seniors share a rotation. Though all juniors are expected to be role models

and mentors for freshmen, those who wish to do it formally apply to be part of the peer mentor program. Applicants go through a selection process and training.

Mentors are responsible for helping first-year students acclimate to the school and its high expectations and assist them in finding activities and programs that appeal to them most. The junior mentors also work with the freshmen during their seven-week exploratory into the different vocational tracks. During the exploratory, the seniors lead the shops and the junior mentors support the students as they learn. The mentors stay with the freshmen through their sophomore year and the mentors' senior year. The result: students report feeling instantly at ease from day one thanks to the knowledge that their mentor is always available to them through sophomore year. And they are instantly made comfortable with the idea of having and using support systems.

Another way the school normalizes support is by doing away with the idea that any service or program is for a specific "type" of student or only one purpose. Instead, while a support service might have been born to meet a defined need, BVT broadens scope without diluting the original intent to welcome all students to use the support without stigma.

An example is the Extended Leave Room, the space created in response to the student who broke her leg and needed help easing back into schoolwork. That room also functions as a mindfulness room. If any student feels she needs a quiet space to decompress or access a social worker, she is welcome to use this room at any time. Students are continually passing through the room for so many reasons that no one necessarily knows why the other is there.

The same is true of the Learning Lab, a support that was originally created to help mainstream students with disabilities and avoid the need for substantially separate classroom settings. The director of student support services designed the lab to mirror that of a college campus lab. The lab is staffed with a paraprofessional who helps students with executive functioning challenges. Yet, the lab also provides access to computers and printers and serves as quiet study or testing space and tutorial support room. The Learning Lab is centrally located in the school and open to all students, and all students feel comfortable using it as needed.

While there are classes where curriculum is adapted for special needs students, their course titles do not give this away. Instead, classes are titled, for example as such: Algebra, College Algebra, Honors Algebra; ELA, College ELA, Honors, ELA, and so on. The BVT team staunchly believes that no student can be put in a box. Every student, rather, is on a continuum of skills. To leave room for this reality, BVT's master schedule is designed so that no student is boxed solely into standard level classes. Instead, a student might take Honors Math and then, when the bell rings, move to standard ELA.

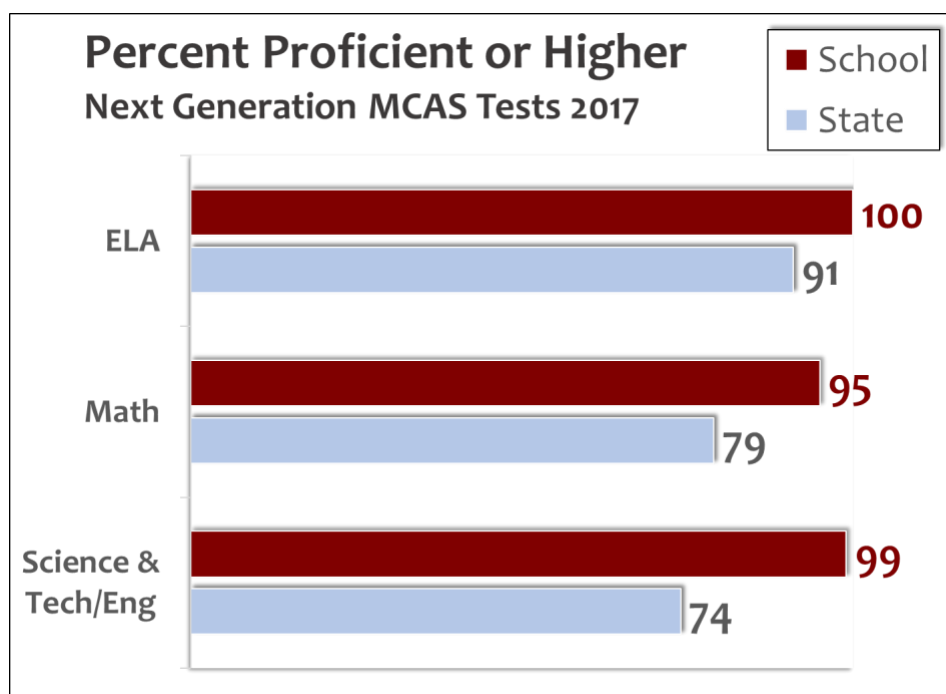
BVT's whole staff puts equal thought and energy into the vocational, academic, and emotional wellbeing aspects of the school. If the promise to students is to do whatever necessary to guide students towards success, their emotional health and sense of psychological and physical safety cannot go unaddressed. And they've been incredibly successful in addressing these concerns. BVT students see no stigma or shame in support or any class. They are comfortable asking for help and report even feeling comfortable going to teachers to discuss sensitive emotional and personal issues. They do this well aware and trusting that they will, in turn, get the help they need.

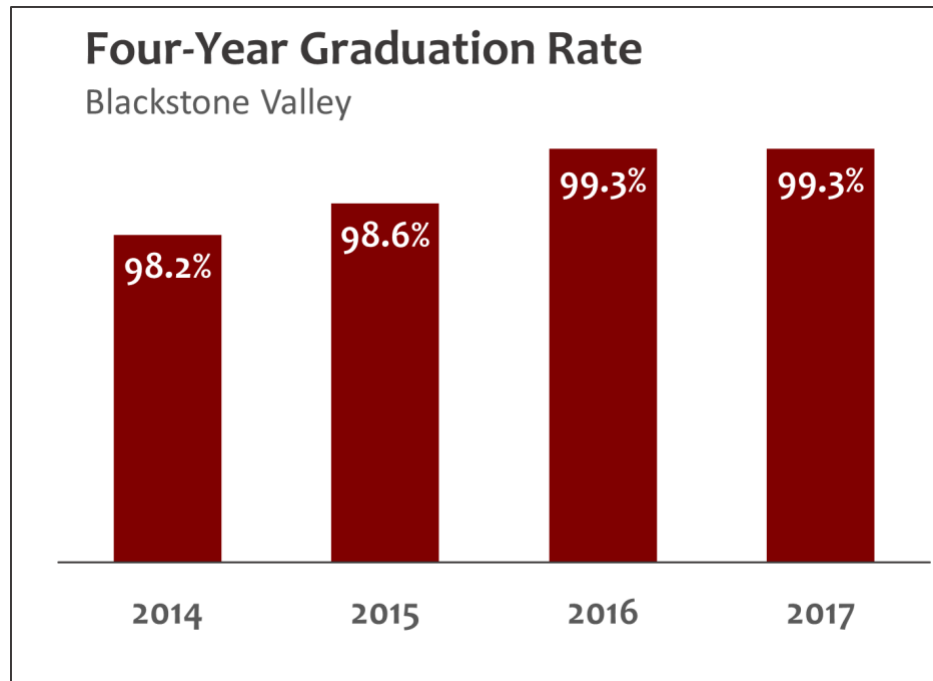
THE IMPACT

Change is the constant at BVT; every educator at the school is committed to adapting any facet of the school experience as often as needed to meet students where they are in order to keep them advancing towards a promising future. As a result, both the BVT team and its students are highly adaptable and flexible. For teachers, this nimbleness means continuing to anticipate and respond to all student needs effectively. And for students, this means yet one more way BVT is instilling in them life skills that contribute to emotional wellbeing and long-term career success in an ever-complex world.

There is an ever-present culture of learning at BVT, and it applies to the staff as well as the students. All staff model lifelong learning by committing to 60 hours of professional development each year. Custodians learn new “green” cleaning techniques, teaching assistants pursue credentialing as teachers, and instructors and administrators strive to advance their levels of certification. Per the assistant superintendent-director/principal: “Valley Tech is a place where the adults grow as much as the students. Everyone is committed to learning at BVT.”

One remarkable outcome has been nearly two decades of sustained improvement year over year on high stakes state exams—a feat very few school districts can claim. Likewise, BVT has steadily increased enrollment each year, yet it attains some of the lowest dropout rates and highest completion rates in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They have successfully demonstrated that their model of integrating rigorous academics and high-level career technical studies makes it not only possible to continuously raise the achievement bar, but also ensures that each student completes not one, but two graduation credentials. Graduates from BVT are indeed college *and* career ready.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do our entire staff and team model for students what a respectful work environment looks like? Do we model what rising to meet high expectations takes and looks like such that students will be motivated also to meet high expectations?
2. Do our students feel like the school is theirs or ours? Do they take pride in coming to school, doing work, and collaborating with peers? If not, why not? What can we change to make students feel like an integral and valued part not only in their own success, but also that of their school? As we empower students, are we ensuring that it translates to responsibility and not entitlement?
3. Are we leaving any student needs, big or small, unmet? If so, how can we grow more creative and resourceful in making sure every last student feels cared for and seen? As we achieve this, are we ensuring that it doesn't come at the detriment of resilience, adaptability, independence, or grit?
4. Do our support services or classes for special needs make any students feel stigmatized or marginalized? How can we evolve and/or mainstream supports to remove stigma from them and make support normal? How can we take our best practices in special education and offer them to all students?

