

Deeper Learning: Paint Valley High School

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Established in 1959, Paint Valley High School (PVHS) is a small public high school set against a picturesque Appalachian Mountain backdrop just outside the village of Bainbridge, in rural southern Ohio. Paint Valley High School (grades 9-12) is part of the larger Paint Valley Local Schools district, instructing pre-K through 12th grade students. The school district houses a Superintendent, an Assistant Superintendent, two District Administrative Assistants, a Treasurer, two Assistants to the Treasurer, and a Nutrition Director (Paint Valley Local Schools, 2023). As of 2022, the high school has a total enrollment of 230 students, trending downward in the past 20 years, carries a student to teacher ratio of twenty-nine to one, and a minority enrollment rate of 4.8%, according to U.S. News (US News, 2023).

Bright spots

ACT Scores

PVHS has experienced an improvement in scores and an increase in scholarship numbers after Melissa Salomone proposed and helped facilitate the launching an ACT Prep program in the fall of 2014 (McGraw, 2021). The program took some time to gain traction, but as stories of positive outcomes rolled in—average ACT scores increased by four to six points compared to students not taking the course—more students began to enroll. In 2020 alone the graduating class was

offered over \$2 million in scholarships. According to the report by McGraw (2021), the ACT Prep course aims to achieve the following four goals:

- Score improvement to help students gain admittance into the college and program they wish to attend.
- With improved scores, students will be awarded more institutional and outside scholarships.
- Getting the scores up and getting into the college of their choice and getting it paid
- If students reach their school benchmark scores then they won't have to take remedial courses in college and so can save time, effort, and money.

Athletics

The Paint Valley Bearcats have a long tradition of success in athletics. The Bearcats baseball team has a history of success, winning several conference and district championships, and taking the Division III Ohio State Championship in 1995 (Wilson, 2020). The Bearcats football team has amassed 12 conference titles, eight gold footballs (undefeated conference championships), and have made 10 trips to the Ohio High School State Playoffs (Webb, 2015). Both Bearcats boys' and girls' basketball programs have won several conference championships, with the girls claiming their third consecutive Ohio Division IV sectional title in 2023 (Gleckler, 2023). The Bearcats track and field and volleyball programs have several championships as well as local and state records in their name, and PVHS recently launched a competitive wrestling program.

Challenges

Academic

In 2022, U.S. News ranked PVHS in the bottom 25th percentile nationally, and among the bottom 30th percentile in Ohio. These rankings are based on six ranking indicators that include college readiness, college curriculum breadth, state assessment proficiency, state assessment performance, underserved student performance, and graduation rate (Morse & Brooks, 2022). and well below expectations. The school scores well below the Ohio average in state graduation tests at 17.5%, and below the state average (50%) in mathematics proficiency at 27% (US News, 2023). Reading and science proficiency data was unavailable for PVHS at the time of this report.

Aside from the strong athletics platform, PVHS is weak on extracurricular opportunities, most notably periphery and elective classes. Despite having a smaller student body, teaching responsibilities are stretched across eight full-time teachers, allowing little time and resources to offer support or course options beyond the core curriculum.

Financial

In 2019 the Paint Valley Board of Education approved nearly \$1 million to invest in a new artificial turf football field. The project was initially intended to be funded by private donations but experienced complications finding businesses willing to invest without seeing the completed field. A 2019 report by Toria Barnhart of the Chillicothe Gazette suggests that the district could be paying for the project



Figure 1 Paint Valley's New Football Field & Track, Litter Media (2020) [video](#)

through 2029 (Barnhart, 2019). Tim Winland, the Superintendent, told the Gazette that despite the high price tag for the field, the school would not fall behind on other construction projects.

Health & Diet

The school displays a breakfast and lunch schedule for each month on its website (Paint Valley Local Schools, 2023). Lunch options are provided each school day in a top-down format that includes such main meal options as Buffalo Crisпитos, Boneless Wings, Chili, General Tso Chicken, Mini Corn Dogs, and Pizza. Whether this diet meets USDA nutrition standards requires further review. The USDA Nutrition Standards for School Meals requires that most schools increase the availability of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free and low-fat fluid milk in school meals; reduce the levels of sodium, saturated fat and trans-fat in meals; and meet the nutrition needs of school children within their calorie requirements (US Department of Agriculture , 2022).

Vision 2025

The following instructional vision for PVHS was prepared using qualitative data from a national private opinion survey ¹ powered by YouGov and the data analytics firm Gradient Metrics (Populace, 2023). Participants were surveyed across a wide array of quality and outcome-based profiles based on 1) what the participant personally thinks should be the purpose of the K-12 education system in America, and 2) what the participant thinks most people think should be the

¹ Methodology: 1,010 American adults were recruited between September 12th to September 30th, 2022, and weighted by gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and geographical region based on U.S. Census data. The survey conducted used a choice-based conjoint (CBC) instrument which forces respondents to make trade-offs according to their priorities. See Figure 2: Purpose of Education Index below for an example of the options, ranking system, proportionality, and Z-scores.

purpose of the K-12 education system in America. The top three results by personal share of preference (SOP) were:

1. Students develop practical skills (e.g., manage personal finances, prepare a meal, make an appointment)
2. Students are able to think critically to problem solve and make decisions
3. Students demonstrate character (e.g., honesty, kindness, integrity, and ethics)

Purpose of Education Index > Appendix A: Complete CBC Results > Gen Pop Results (2019-2022)

A1: Gen Pop Results (2019-2022)

(Table 1/6)
(Sorted by 2022 Personal Rank)

	2022			2021			2020			2019														
	Personal		Perceived Societal	Personal		Perceived Societal	Personal		Perceived Societal	Personal		Perceived Societal												
	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z	#	SOP	Z												
Students develop practical skills (e.g. manage personal finances, prepare a meal, make an appointment)	1	2.55	2.85	8	1.95	1.03	1	2.64	3.24	3	2.06	1.60	1	2.26	3.03	8	1.91	1.23	1	2.64	3.53	28	1.77	0.08
Students are able to think critically to problem solve and make decisions	2	2.41	2.35	1	2.34	3.07	2	2.24	1.77	15	1.90	0.76	2	2.09	2.01	22	1.78	0.20	4	2.17	1.66	33	1.72	-0.18
Students demonstrate character (e.g. honesty, kindness, integrity, and ethics)	3	2.35	2.14	26	1.78	0.14	9	2.04	1.04	21	1.81	0.29	4	1.96	1.23	13	1.84	0.68	3	2.21	1.82	36	1.71	-0.24
Students can demonstrate basic reading, writing, and arithmetic	4	2.22	1.67	2	2.10	1.81	4	2.17	1.52	1	2.29	2.81	10	1.88	0.75	2	2.05	2.33	14	1.89	0.54	6	2.00	1.31
All students receive the unique supports that they need throughout their learning	5	2.17	1.49	5	2.05	1.55	16	1.89	0.50	10	1.94	0.97	19	1.83	0.46	29	1.74	-0.11	19	1.86	0.42	21	1.81	0.30

Figure 2: Purpose of Education Index (Populace, 2023)

Key objectives and stakeholder deliverables were organized using Mehta and Fine’s 2019 analysis on deeper learning, where the education researchers found *mastery*, *identity*, and *creativity* to be most consistent with the top performing U.S. schools today (Mehta & Fine, 2019). Classroom dynamics were constructed based on Bryk et al.’s (2010) “instructional triangle,” linking engagement and interactions between teachers, students, and the environment (Bryk, Allensworth, Sebring, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010).

Using the above insights as a guide, and taking into consideration the unique bright spots, gaps, and influence of context within PVHS, we are recommending the following outcomes and student experience objectives to be completed by 2025:

- **Outcome 1: *Students can think critically to problem solve and make decisions.***
 - Adoption of a competency-based pedagogy to incentivize mastery of content (Mehta & Fine, 2019, pp. 226-227).
 - Students are provided with autonomy & choice through learning modules, different paces, and a culture where failure is accepted as part of learning process.
 - Students take on a problem or objective of their choice, producing material of lasting value through projects they are passionate about.
 - Students and teachers together practice educational symmetry by emphasizing autonomy, production, purpose, and passion.
 - Students are self-reflective (Mehta p. 47), prepared for to be “productive citizens” post K-12 (Mehta p. 55)

- **Outcome 2: *Students are equipped with the practical skills necessary for real-world challenges.***
 - A staff, pedagogy, curriculum, and school setting that encourages engagement & ‘deeper learning,’ connecting core curriculum to real-world issues.
 - Student/faculty/school leadership exposure to social and emotional learning (SEL) programs that are associated with improved attitudes, behavior, and academic

performance, preparing students for professional environments and real-world challenges.²

- **Outcome 3: *A learning environment that promotes equity, agency, passion, and sustainability.***
 - Healthy diet options on breakfast/lunch menus.
 - A school infrastructure that is designed using the latest insights in behavioral design to promote collaboration, transparency, and agency.
 - Student participation & peer-to-peer engagement is prioritized during in-class sessions.³
 - Access to mental health services & encouraged to seek help.⁴
 - All students regardless of ability receive the unique support that they need throughout the learning process.
 - Teachers have ownership in all levels of the policy actor framework, as defined by Ball et al., 2011.⁵

² See the Durlak et al. (2011) meta-analysis titled ‘The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions’ that shows an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement for students exposed to SEL programs.

³ A 2019 study measuring the link between classroom talk and student achievement found that students who talked and argued more in language arts lessons had better performance results on reading literacy tests (Sedova, et al., 2019).

⁴ The CDC recommends providing youths with better access to mental health care services, comprehensive approaches that promote help-seeking behaviors, establishing connections with trusted adults and supportive peers, and offering engagement in community activities, all of which are shown to have many benefits including improved feelings of connectedness, better mental health, reduced risk for suicide, reduced prevalence of health risk behaviors, and better academic achievement (Jones, et al., 2022).

⁵ Teachers to act as Narrators, Entrepreneurs, Outsiders, Enthusiasts, Translators, Critics, and Receivers to guide & implement policy change (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011).

A Roadmap to Change

Policy changes in any organization setting is difficult, but education policy, especially among smaller schools with longstanding instructors and organizational leaders who have become more comfortable with their process, provides a unique challenge. To accomplish Vision 2025 goals, PVHS will require a collective and consistent guide to ensure all stakeholders are following the same backward mapping approach to institutional change, working in unison toward a larger mission. For an overview of this approach, please see Table 1 Paint Valley High School: Vision 2025.

Lampert et al. (2011) find that collective action that is supported by common materials and an intellectual underpinning is most useful and routinely used. Lampert et al. (2011) also call to attention the need for a multiplicity of resources that are delivered in unison rather than in piecemeal. Following this guidance, teachers, administrators, and leadership will be able to see, enact, and routinely interpret Vision 2025.

Teacher Equity, Agency, and Career Longevity

To encourage buy-in from the school faculty, whose support is most valuable, PVHS leadership will highlight the incentives of Vision 2025 that meet their unique concerns and pain points. Surveying of the PVHS organization is needed to understand unique pain points, but according to recent research⁶ they are likely to include at least one of the following: 1) time scarcity and isolation from peers; 2) deficient perceptions of control and authority; 3) insecurity about skill

⁶ See Good, A. G., Barocas, S. F., Chávez-Moreno, L. C., Feldman, R., & Canela, C. (2017). A seat at the table: How the work of teaching impacts teachers as policy agents. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(4), 505-520.

level and ability to affect policy changes. PVHS will work with faculty to ensure they have the time, resources, and support to overcome any institutional barriers.

To address these concerns, leadership will offer faculty a roadmap to agency and empowerment, including the assurance that teachers will 1) actively participate in the policy writing and approval process, 2) be encouraged to suggest provisions that are included in final legislation, and 3) issue official guidance or commentary that becomes actionable.⁷ To eliminate silos and administrative ‘cliques’, and to curb deficient perceptions of authority, PVHS will encourage teacher partnerships and cross-departmental collaborations, and will flatten to resemble a more flexible horizontal hierarchical structure across the organization. To further inspire agency and empower teachers, a university partnership will be established with the local Ohio University Chillicothe branch, subsidizing teacher education and allowing teachers the opportunity to continue learning in an education residency program of their choosing.

With this empowerment and agency, PVHS will achieve Vision 2025 through practice-based micro-institutional change, a process that Bridwell-Mitchell (2016, pp. 184-185) describes as encouraging participation from numerous, diverse, and non-elite stakeholders working in collaboration to construct shared understandings, aims, and practices that will help the school navigate this new educational environment.⁸

⁷ See Ball, S. (2006). *Education policy and social class: The selected works of Stephen Ball*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁸ Bridwell-Mitchell (2016) suggests emphasizing 1) peer learning (innovation and socialization), 2) interaction (cohesion and diversity), and 3) shared understandings (cognitive and normative convergence) to reach micro-institutional change.

Behavioral Design

The above is predicated on individual actors acting in unison to accomplish Vision 2025 goals. Just as important is a physical setting that inspires agency and promotes a culture of collaboration, engagement, and creativity.⁹ To accomplish this, PVHS will hire an outside behavioral design agency such as IDEO to redesign a school setting that inspires production, visible learning, engagement, and a high standard of quality (Mehta & Fine, 2019, pp. 77-78).

Pedagogy & Curriculum

PVHS will follow a competency-based model, deviating from the current batch-processing system where possible. By emphasizing learning modules, different paces, autonomy, and acceptance of failure as part of learning process, PVHS will ensure each student think critically to problem solve and make decisions, gain the practical skills necessary for real-world challenges, and find agency and passion in their learning (Mehta & Fine, 2019, pp. 225-226).

Additionally, PVHS will provide teachers with the resources to offer a wider array electives, clubs, and periphery courses, known to improve passion and school engagement (Mehta & Fine, 2019, pp. 220-225). These resources, opportunities, and experiences will offer students (and teachers) more choice, autonomy, ownership, and the opportunity to produce projects and ideas of lasting value.

⁹ Mehta & Fine (2019, pp. 77-78) found that deeper learning policy in the abstract is insufficient. Leaders at the successful Dewey High School created a deeply aesthetic experience to communicate about the institution's distinct qualities: production, visible learning, and the standards of quality to which students are held. "*What do the walls say?*"

Finally, PVHS will partner with an independent contractor such as Positive Action¹⁰ to offer a social and emotional learning (SEL) program, helping students learn social and emotional skills that are proving effective in improving social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance.¹¹

Considerations

Instructional inertia (change is hard)

Moving away from traditional practices and the batch processing model will be difficult for PVHS. The school has taken a ‘thoroughbred’ approach to faculty, with teachers often siloed off and disconnected from the teaching styles of their peers. PVHS leadership will need to lean on the latest insights in organizational psychology and behavioral science to make institutional change as exciting and effortless as possible. Using the elephant and the rider metaphor from social psychologist Jonathan Haidt¹², and the “change the path” strategy from researchers Chip and Dan Heath¹³, PVHS will speak to:

- **The Rider:** demonstrate empirical evidence to support policy changes.
- **The Elephant:** use the power of narratives to illustrate how policy has improved the lives of high school students, and what PVHS students have to gain from this new pedagogy.
- **The Path:** teachers are time and resource constrained — make the path to change easy.

¹⁰ See more info at <https://www.positiveaction.net/>

¹¹ A 2020 study found that PATHS, a classroom-based social and emotional learning (SEL) program for elementary school students, led to students who were less impulsive, less disruptive, and displayed less opposition to teachers and parents. In class, treated children become less likely to disturb lessons and more likely to focus on the teaching content (Sorrenti, Zöllitz, Ribeaud, & Eisner, 2020).

¹² See *The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt (Haidt, 2006)

¹³ See *Switch* by Chip and Dan Heath (Heath & Heath, 2010)

Other systemic challenges

PVHS takes great pride in its recent success with ACT scores, and according to the reporting cited above, PVHS students are receiving significant endowments to go toward college tuition as a result of strong ACT scores. As long as standardized tests are required for college admission, the school will need to incorporate aspects of ACT-prep into its curriculum. With this constraint, PVHS leadership will look for opportunities to match new policies up with existing ones and should solicit feedback from teachers and teacher teams on how to make standardized test prep more engaging and interactive for students (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010).

Conclusion

Paint Valley High School is respected for its long history of success in academics and athletics, evident by the generations of past students whose photos and memorabilia mark the school's hallways, and whose stories speak to a rewarding high school experience. Families in the area are proud of their connection to the school—the passion and support that the surrounding community has for the Paint Valley school system is moving and inspiring. Despite recent academic and financial struggles, PVHS holds the promise of brighter days ahead. Vision 2025, in commitment and engagement from all members of the PVHS organization, will help re-establish Paint Valley High School as a leader in academic agency, equity, engagement, and sustainability

2025 Outcomes	Measurement methods (i.e., survey, test scores, graduation statistics, college admittance, job placement, etc.)	Student Experience Objectives (changes that lead to the outcome)	Teacher Deliverables (staff learning targets)	Teacher Team Deliverables (dept. & professional growth teams)	Leadership Deliverables (district office, principle staff, administrator targets)	All Stakeholders (includes students, teachers, teacher teams, leadership, parents/caretakers, & other stakeholders)
<i>Students can think critically to problem solve and make decisions.</i>	Pre- / post-intervention standardized test scores. Pre- / post-intervention trends in quantitative measures post high graduation.	Adoption of a competency-based pedagogy emphasizing autonomy & choice through learning modules, different paces, and a culture where failure is accepted as part of learning process. Students take on a problem or objective of their choice, producing material of lasting value through projects they are passionate about.	Teacher ownership in all levels of the Ball et al. (2011) policy actor framework, acting as Narrators, Entrepreneurs, Outsiders, Enthusiasts, Translators, Critics, and Receivers to guide & implement policy change. Organize with peers of diverse teaching styles & educational topics to form teacher teams and offer unique, interesting cross-disciplinary opportunities for students.	Organize into diverse peer partnerships and develop cross-disciplinary learning opportunities for students Work with students to offer electives and periphery courses that provide students & teachers with choice, autonomy, and ownership, with a focus on producing something of lasting and meaningful value.	Act as facilitators for change, setting up teacher teams, encouraging peer learning, and empowering teachers Ensure online learning resources are available for all students Offer university-partnership learning opportunities to empower teachers & administrators	Build a culture of micro-institutional change through peer learning, interaction, and shared understandings. Participate in parent-teacher learning modules to understand school objectives, methodology, curriculum, and how to participate.
<i>Students are equipped with the practical skills necessary for real-world challenges.</i>	Pre- / post-intervention trends in quantitative measures post high graduation.	A staff, pedagogy, curriculum, and school setting that encourages engagement & 'deep learning,' connecting core curriculum to real-world issues. Inclusion of SEL courses that improve on social and emotional skills that are essential to success in professional environments.	Work with teacher teams, leadership, students, parents, and university partners to adapt teaching pedagogy to meet the needs of an engagement-based academic environment that fosters deep learning.	Offer students 1.5 hours of time each day (20% of school day) to engage in a project of their choosing, guiding them toward producing something of lasting and meaningful value.	Provide the time and resources necessary for staff to organize & engage with each other, develop curriculums, and offer feedback/direction toward policy deliverables Re-design school architecture & learning settings based on the latest insights in behavioral design to encourage engagement & deeper learning	Work with teachers and school leadership to ensure students have the necessary resources for deeper learning. Local businesses to work with school in independent projects, apprenticeships, and other partnership opportunities.
<i>A learning environment that promotes equity, agency, passion, and sustainability.</i>	Survey data collected during high school and 5 years post-graduation. Pre- / post-intervention trends in attendance data.	Healthy diet options on breakfast/lunch menus. A school setting that promotes fun and engagement. Student participation & peer-to-peer engagement encompasses at least 50% of class time. Access to mental health services & encouraged to seek help. All students receive the individualized, unique support that they need throughout their learning.			Introduce social and emotional learning (SEL) into curriculum emphasizing social skills, mental health awareness, judgement, and decision-making	Build a culture of pride around student and teacher success.

Table 1 Paint Valley High School: Vision 2025

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