

An Introduction to Big Picture Schools: Getting High School Right for Adolescent Learners

About the Met School

Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky founded the Met School in Providence Rhode Island in 1995. The Met works with a diverse student body in a low income community and boasts the highest rates of attendance, graduation and college acceptance in the state. It is small, its curriculum is rich and meaningful, expectations are high, progress is measured against real world standards and families and communities are actively engaged in the educational process.

About Big Picture Learning

Since 2001 Big Picture Learning, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has replicated the Met school model in over sixty sites - fourteen states in the United States and in Israel, Australia and the Netherlands. This fall Seven Oaks School Division will launch the first Big Picture School in Canada as a “school within a school” at Garden City Collegiate.

About Elliot Washor

Elliot Washor, Ed.D. is the co-founder and co-director of Big Picture Learning. He is also the co-founder of The Met Center in Providence, Rhode Island.



Elliot has been involved in school reform for more than 30 years as a teacher, principal, administrator, video producer, and writer. He has taught and is interested in all levels of school from kindergarten through college, in urban and rural settings, across all disciplines. His work has spanned across school design, pedagogy, learning environments, and education reform and is supporting others doing similar work throughout the world. Elliot's interests lie in the field of how schools can connect with communities to understand tacit and disciplinary learning both in and outside of school. Elliot is deeply committed to imagining Big Picture Learning as a 'do-think-do' organization, and persistently pushes the boundaries of its design in order to continually innovate practice and influence in the world of education.

At Thayer High School in Winchester, N.H., Elliot's professional development programs won an “Innovations in State and Local Government Award” from the Ford Foundation and the



Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He has been selected as an educator to watch in Rhode Island and has recently been selected as one of the Dirty Dozen – the Twelve Most Daring Educators in the World by the George Lucas Educational Foundation. His dissertation on Innovative Pedagogy and New Facilities won the merit award from DesignShare, the international forum for innovative schools.

About Big Picture

Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor established Big Picture Learning in 1995 with the sole mission of encouraging, inciting and effecting change in the U.S. educational system. Dennis and Elliot merged their thirty years of individual experiences as teachers and principals in public high schools and their distinct national reputations for successful educational innovation to co-direct this effort. **With a motto of ‘education is everyone’s business’ and an intention to demonstrate that schooling and education can and should be radically changed, the Big Picture was born.**

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

Around the same time, the state of Rhode Island was re-examining its educational system, particularly its vocational and technical programs. **Big Picture proposed a school design - a bold new school dedicated to educating one student at a time.** After garnering considerable community support, the state legislature approved the concept for the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, informally referred to as ‘the Met’. The first of the six schools





opened in 1996 with a freshman class of 50 students – mostly ‘at-risk’ African American and Latino students who ‘did not fit’ in conventional schools.

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

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



With these ground-breaking successes came considerable national attention. **The director of educational programs at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced that the Met was his favorite high school in America, and that the U.S. needs more schools like it.** In 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave Big Picture Learning a large grant to replicate the Met around the country. In

2003, after the continued success of Big Picture schools, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pledged a second grant to fund the launch of even more schools. Also, in 2003, the Gates Foundation awarded Big Picture monies to make them lead convener of the newly formed Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI).

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

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



Big Picture Learning is shifting our emphasis from directly starting new schools to three broad areas of work that are strategic, unified and synergistic, informed by research and best practice, and respectful of individual and organizational change. Through our practices and schools, and our intense dissemination efforts, all of our work is intended to influence the national debate about

public education. We want to help convince opinion leaders (policymakers, business leaders, media representatives, and educators) as well as parents and the public, that there are better ways to educate our children.

For more information, go to:
www.bigpicture.org