

IBPLC



International Big Picture Learning Credential

Context & Case Study

Scott Boldt
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Report Sponsored by:



BACKGROUND

The **International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC)** involves a rigorous assessment process that allows schools and youth development organizations to facilitate and develop wider forms of learning, affording young people more real-world and culturally-appropriate experiences.



The **IBPLC** has its roots and effectively began 30 years ago with the establishment of **Big Picture Learning (BPL)** in the USA with its emphasis on “authentic assessment” as opposed to narrow, curriculum-driven standardized testing. From when it was founded, students in **BPL** schools compiled their work and evidence of their learning in portfolios, and their teachers (advisors) wrote ongoing narratives on each student in their advisories. Students exhibited their learning, usually on a quarterly basis, in presentations to their advisories with reference to the learning goals in their personal Learning Plans.



BPL started in Providence, Rhode Island in 1995, and the basic practice and philosophy of BPL is built around student interests, relationships with adults, and applied practice in real world situations, because, according to co-founder Elliot Washor,

“

We know that learning happens best when interests, relationships, and practice are woven together. People learn more quickly, more deeply, more comprehensively, and more meaningfully when they are pursuing their interests with skilled people who know them and let them practice, play, make mistakes, start over again,

ask more questions, test things out, and then show what they can do - not tested on how smart they are in a lab-like setting. I like the phrase *muddling through, mingling with, mattering to* which captures how most of us learn most of the time.”



Coincidentally, in 1995 when **BPL** was founded, Ernest Boyer, then president of the Carnegie Foundation, stated:

“

The time has come to bury the old Carnegie unit; since the Foundation I now head created this unit of academic measure nearly a century ago, I feel authorized to declare it obsolete. Why? Because it has helped turn schooling into an exercise in trivial pursuit.”

Now, 30 years later, Boyer’s critique in “The Educated Person” (1995) still rings true.

“

Students get academic credit, but they fail to gain a coherent view of what they study. While curious young children still ask why things are, many older children only ask, ‘Will this be on the test?’”

According to Elliot Washor, “we are and should be interested in how you are smart, not how smart you are on a test.”

BPL wants to understand more in-depth how the **IBPLC** has been rolled out and received in the USA since it was piloted three years ago. Under the auspices of Bath Spa University, a research team has carried out a series of in-person and online interviews, school visits, desk research, and data analysis to appraise

the work of the **BPL** USA team in training educators and supporting the development and expansion of the **IBPLC** in America.

To understand and contextualize the **IBPLC**, research from Australia, where the credential was first developed and introduced, will be summarized followed by a presentation of the experiences of **BPL** Barbados and Kenya who have been using the **IBPLC** since 2021. A case study of **BPL** LaFayette in New York which uses the **IBPLC** with all its students (Years 9-12) will then be provided as well as insights from a non-**BPL** school in Los Angeles and the experiences of other **BPL** pilot schools.



Carnegie Corporation of New York was established by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding. Today the foundation works to reduce political polarization through philanthropic support for the issues that Carnegie considered most important: education, democracy, and peace.

BPL AUSTRALIA CASE STUDY



OVERVIEW

The **IBPLC** originated with **Big Picture Learning Australia (BPLA)** when Viv White, Co-Founder and CEO of BPLA, and her team of educators codified, articulated, and designed the **IBPLC** in collaboration with Professor Sandra Milligan from the University of Melbourne's Assessment Research Center (now known as Melbourne Metrics). **BPLA** realized that they needed a whole new credential to become a creditable pathway to higher education, training, or employment, that was capable of capturing and measuring the diverse skills, knowledge and qualities of **BPL** students. The **IBPLC** has quickly become a proven, universally applicable assessment tool that provides for fair, culturally unbiased, and meaningful school-based evaluations that lead to a stand-alone, digitized credential. A key factor in the **IBPLC** is the valuing of teacher

professionalism and judgment in the assessment process because of the deep knowledge that they have of each student, whom they have seen grow over time. With Melbourne Metrics' support, **BPLA** was able to provide a credible alternative to the standardized forms of assessment to cover a broader range of a student's knowledge, skills, and qualities than is conventional.



Since 2020, more than 1,044 **BPLA** students have obtained the credential that is warranted by the University of Melbourne. Since 2022, the **IBPLC** has been issued via the University Admissions Center's Credfolio platform. Each credential is a digital transcript which includes:

- **An advisory teacher statement**
- **Links to the student's online portfolio and video profile**
- **A flower graph of their final progression levels across the six Big Picture Learning Goals (Communication, Empirical Reasoning, Knowing How to Learn, Personal Qualities, Quantitative Reasoning, and Social Reasoning)**
- **Room for the student to include their real-world experiences and achievements**

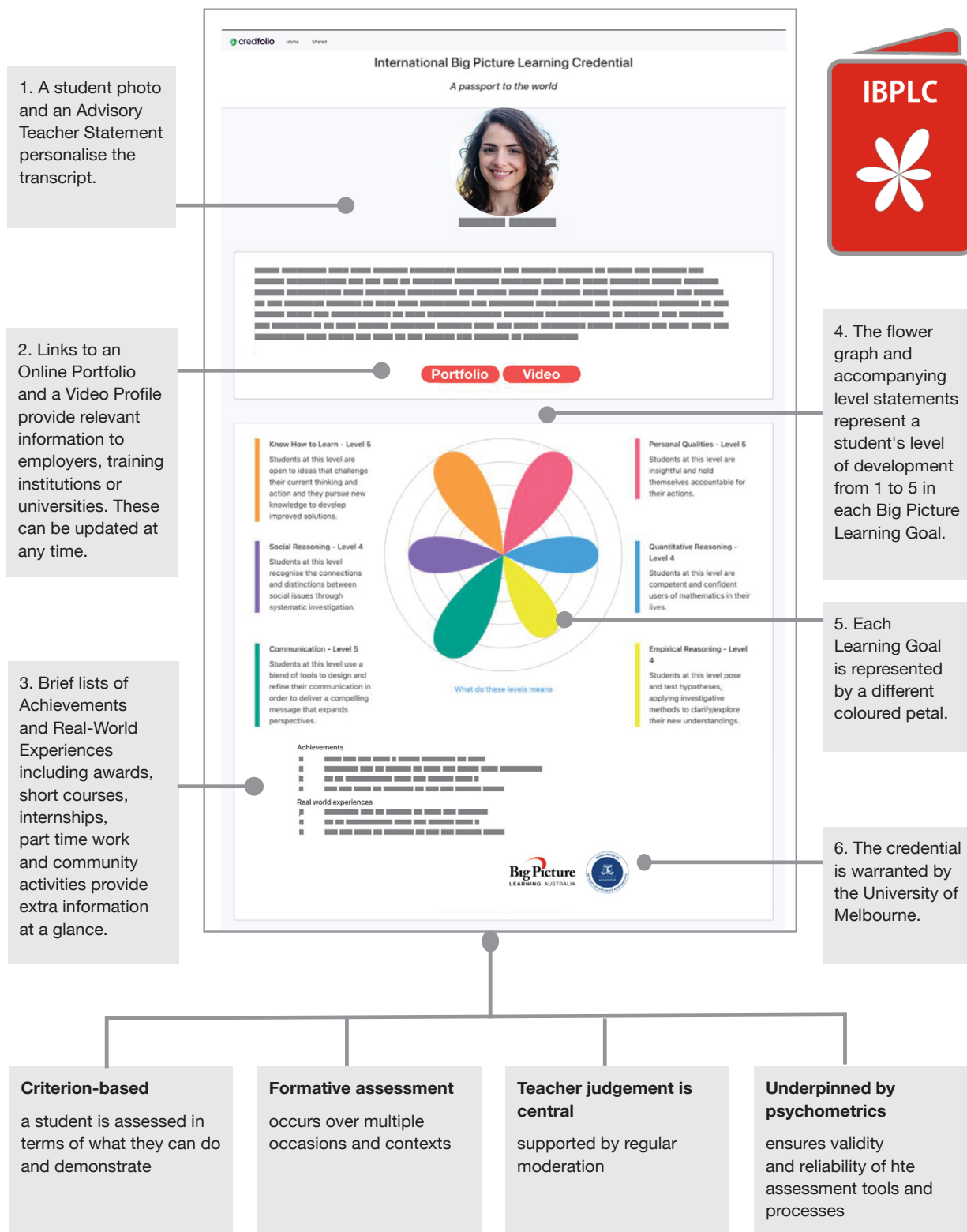
ASSESSMENT AND THE IBPLC

Because each student's journey is shaped by their interests, passions, circumstances, community connections, and real-world experiences, the **IBPLC** shifts the focus from standardized testing to developmental, interest-driven learning. Among the key sources of evidence used in Australia are:

- **Senior Thesis or Project**
- **Autobiography**
- **Internships and other forms of real-world learning**
- **Exhibitions**
- **Social Action Initiatives**
- **Online Portfolio and Video Profile**

Each student is assessed by their advisory teacher across the six **Big Picture Learning Goals** four times across Years 11 and 12. These Learning Goals are underpinned by Assessment Frames which describe observable behaviours across a range of capabilities. Teachers make multiple judgments using the Assessment Frames to ensure that student capabilities and growth are accurately represented. Teachers enter a range of indicators of capability before selecting an overall 'Progression Level' from 1 to 5. Teacher judgments are then entered into Ruby (a digital assessment platform developed by the University of Melbourne's Assessment Research Center) and validated by the psychometricians at Melbourne Metrics.

International Big Picture Learning Credential





SUPPORTING TEACHERS

The professional judgment of advisory teachers is a crucial aspect of assessment in the **IBPLC**. Advisory teachers know their students deeply and are well-placed to evaluate their development and progress with reference to evidence found in student work and performances.

To maintain the integrity of the **IBPLC** and to give confidence to all stakeholders, **BPL** advisory teachers and leaders participate in regular moderation practices to ensure

the consistency and reliability of their judgments. There are three types of moderation in order to ensure consistency across the country, as well as in each school:

- 1 In-school moderation with colleagues**
- 2 Cross-school moderation events with colleagues from across the Big Picture network (these occur 3 times a year)**
- 3 External moderation of progression level 5s with the advisory teacher and their school coach.**

Additionally, all advisory teachers assessing for the **IBPLC** need to be licensed. This ensures that they have had the training to understand the key concepts associated with the **IBPLC**, and are familiar with the processes for making reliable judgments and using the Ruby platform to enter assessment data.

To facilitate the licensing process, the BPLA website tracks new advisory teachers as they complete online training modules. Once an advisory teacher is licensed, the **IBPLC** School Administrator provides them with access to the Ruby platform. Licenses last for 5 years and there are opportunities to recognize prior learning and experience. Teachers are expected to keep their license current by participating in annual cross-school moderation events.



STUDENT OUTCOMES AND DESTINATIONS

BPLA's 2024 Destination Study, with 95% student participation, highlights the breadth and alignment of graduate pathways with student interests and learning experiences. Some important demographics of the students are:

- **4.9% EALD (English as an Additional Language or Dialect)**
- **7.7% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**
- **39.6% students with a diagnosed disability**

The study found that 93.9% of students completed a Senior Thesis or Project, 73.6% had at least one mentor, 67.2% undertook a significant internship (5+ days) in all manner of workplaces, including placements in hospitals, media companies, law firms, pilot training academies, outdoor education, permaculture gardens, parliament offices, and graphic design studios. Among the students, 53.4% earned a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) qualification and 28.8% earned other qualifications such as a Real Estate License, UAV Pilot License, Boat License, Mental Health First Aid Accreditation, and a Food Safety Certificate.

Regarding Post-School Pathways, a majority of 37.3% went to University (28 via early entry), 20.5% to TAFE or RTOs (Registered Training Organizations), 5.0% entered Apprenticeships, 23.6% went into Employment and others entered the Defense Forces, engaged in creative pursuits or professional sports.

University choices varied with students' interests. Young people took up degrees in Criminology, Cybersecurity, Education, Game Design, Physical Therapy, Marine Biology, Music, Anthropology, Nursing, Languages, Business, Occupational Therapy, Industrial Design and more. The courses and these overall outcomes affirm the credential's role in supporting transitions aligned with student strengths and interests.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Since its inception, the research has shown that the **IBPLC** is a valid, standards-aligned credential that matches or surpasses conventional senior secondary certifications. The findings from these works are consolidated below to provide an overview of the credential's integrity, impact, and recognition in Australia. The University of Melbourne annually validates the credential using the

Melbourne Metrics Warranting Framework, which includes 22 criteria across eight design features. The data from 2023 confirms that the credential is reliable, equitable, and comparable across contexts.

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- **15 criteria were rated Met or Exceeding**
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- **7 criteria were Developing**
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- **0 were in the Early Stage**
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- **4 criteria showed year-on-year improvement**
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In 2021, a Standards Alignment Report titled **"Standards in the International Big Picture Learning Credential: Mapping the IBPLC Performance Levels to the AQF and ACSF"** was published by Melbourne Metrics' Professor Sandra Milligan et al. This was a comprehensive mapping exercise that compared the **IBPLC** with the:

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- **Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF): Specifically, the Senior Secondary Certificate descriptor.**
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- **Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF): Focusing on communication, learning, numeracy, and reading across Levels 1–5.**
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The findings from these comparisons showed:

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- **The IBPLC fully meets AQF expectations in knowledge, skills, and application.**
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- **Students achieving Level 5 in the IBPLC demonstrate or exceed ACSF Level 5 capabilities across all six Learning Goals.**
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- **Notably, IBPLC students show higher levels of autonomy, complexity, and interdisciplinary transfer than typically expected at senior secondary levels. This is because they have pursued their learning in an integrated way, rather than from within discrete subjects.**

This alignment supports its credibility with post-secondary institutions and universities as well as employers, both nationally and internationally.

While 18 universities recognize the **IBPLC** in Australia, institutional awareness remains variable. To strengthen recognition and trust in the **IBPLC**, BPLA is engaged in initiatives aimed at building predictive validity and expanding acceptance of the credential including:

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- **Matching for Success (Melbourne Metrics): Aligning credentials such as the IBPLC with university selection models by better matching student capabilities with course requirements.**
 - **Longitudinal Research: Led by Prof. John Fischetti (University of Newcastle) to track graduate outcomes over time. One of the key findings from this research indicates that a student has already demonstrated deep and often specialized knowledge and experience in a degree course and is therefore likely to 'stick with it'.**

In summary, the **IBPLC** in Australia represents a rigorous, inclusive, and future-ready design for senior secondary education. It replaces standardized exams with a clearly articulated and replicable system that values autonomy, creativity, and relevance. Validated by the University of Melbourne and aligned with Australian national standards, it empowers learners from all backgrounds to chart meaningful post-school pathways. As **BPL** continues to expand, the **IBPLC** sets a new benchmark for what 21st-century secondary credentials can and should be—personal, authentic, and aligned with the real world.

INTERNATIONAL

As the **IBPLC** has grown in Australia, it has also successfully been adopted in Barbados and Kenya (since 2021) with students obtaining the credential each subsequent year. In the USA, the **IBPLC** was piloted in 2022 in California, Massachusetts, New York and Washington. The credential is primed to scale across the states and internationally. It has been promoted with members of the US team presenting the **IBPLC** to participants at Aurora Institute, ASU+GSV, BOOST, Deeper Learning, Linked Learning, the Future of Learning Council, and at the annual **BPL** conferences, Big Bang and Leadership Summit.

BIG PICTURE LEARNING BARBADOS



PHASING OUT STANDARDIZED TESTING

OVERVIEW

Beyond the Box Education is an independent **BPL** school in Barbados, founded in 2018 by Gabrielle Logan. Starting with just eight students, it now serves around 60 and offers education from nursery through high school. In 2021, the school adopted the **IBPLC** as an alternative graduation pathway. Its first **IBPLC** graduate was also the first student to obtain the credential outside Australia.

Gaby was the first non-Australian educator trained to administer the **IBPLC**. Working one-on-one with the Australian team and a single student, she “internalized” the frames and later trained her staff. “I was spoilt - one-on-one training from the Australian team. It was pretty beautiful.” Since 2021, the school has graduated five **IBPLC** students, with more expected from 2026 onward.



TRANSITION FROM STANDARDIZED EXAMS

Currently, about 50% of senior students pursue the **IBPLC** exclusively, while others either combine it with CXC exams (the Caribbean standardized system) or pursue the CXC exams alone. The school is however undergoing a full transition and by 2027, the **IBPLC** will be the only graduation option offered. “We needed to set a date and we have. By 2027, it will be **IBPLC** only.”



The school's shift away from standardized testing marks a significant departure from the dominant educational culture in Barbados, where the CSEC and CAPE exams (similar to British GCSEs and A-levels) are seen as the primary path to university. Most of the teaching staff were trained within this system, and early adoption of the **IBPLC** was met with resistance.

Educators were quick to see the value of internships and real-world learning, and the process of uploading evidence was relatively straightforward. However, the deeper cultural challenge lay in shifting teachers' perceptions of what student achievement looks like and letting go of the assumption that test scores are the ultimate measure of readiness or success. "There was a lot of unlearning to do. Many still felt students needed exams just to be safe." This resistance led to initial staff

turnover, but the current team is aligned with the school's mission and committed to a full transition to the **IBPLC**.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Parental concerns mirrored those of staff. Many parents feared that removing standardized exams would limit university access. The school's firm stance on the optional 11+ exam in 2022—choosing not to prepare students for it—led to an immediate drop in enrollment, from around 80 students to 40. According to Gaby, this "exodus" was also clarifying. The families who remained were those aligned with the school's values and willing to support its progressive direction. Still, concerns persist, particularly among some parents aiming for their children to attend university.

“Yes, this isn’t a traditional path, but here’s why it’s better, here’s why it’s more meaningful for your child.” The school has addressed these fears through ongoing dialogue, reassurances about university support, and real success stories. **IBPLC** graduates have been accepted into their first-choice universities, including Swansea University (UK), Concordia University in Montreal and University of Toronto, University of Technology Sydney, John Cabot University in Rome, the University of the West Indies, and Bryant University, Rhode Island.

UNIVERSITY RECOGNITION

Admissions to university with the **IBPLC** have required extensive advocacy. “If there’s a ‘no’, I’ll call admissions, explain the credential, and have meetings. We’ve changed minds—that’s encouraging.” A successful application to the University of Toronto involved six months of correspondence and documentation. The institution required confirmation of accreditation, an equivalency letter, and performance indicators—despite the credential being awarded only after graduation.

To address this, the school is developing a competency-based tracking system aligned with the six **IBPLC** Assessment Frames plus two additional areas: world languages and the arts. The system is intended to provide transparent, ongoing records of student progress to support university applications. This work introduces some tension in that translating personal, project-based learning into conventional academic “course codes” undermines, to an extent, the ethos of the **IBPLC** and **BPL**. “This is the hardest part—how do we stay true to what we’re doing and still ‘play the game’ for universities?”

INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The Barbadian government is undergoing education reform with interest in project-based and competency-based learning. Gaby has had discussions with the national board of education to help them understand the value of alternative graduate pathways.

While curriculum retention remains a government priority, there is openness to innovation. One potential collaboration could involve state-funded placements for students struggling in public schools. This could serve as a proof point for the success of the **BPL** design and the **IBPLC**.



The University of the West Indies, the region's largest higher education institution, represents the school's biggest recognition challenge. Though initial meetings with UWI's Dean of Admissions and Vice Chancellor were positive, leadership turnover reset progress. The new Dean has requested a formal proposal detailing how the **IBPLC** aligns with local qualifications.

Two **IBPLC** graduates were accepted into UWI, but only on the condition of completing a preparatory year—effectively turning a three-year degree into a four-year program. This has become a priority issue for the school's leadership, particularly as the full transition to the **IBPLC** approaches.

To focus on building institutional partnerships and improving recognition, Gaby has stepped back from day-to-day operations and hired a new principal with a background in **BPL** in Australia. "By 2027, it will be **IBPLC** only. I want to ensure our students have every door open to them."

The implementation of the **IBPLC** at Beyond the Box Education offers valuable insights into both the promise and complexity of moving away from standardized testing in favor of holistic, student-centered assessment. The transition has required cultural change among educators and parents, institutional advocacy, and strong and sustained leadership with international support from the **BPL** network.

BIG PICTURE LEARNING KENYA



ADAPTING THE IBPLC TO POST-SECONDARY YOUTH PATHWAYS

OVERVIEW

Big Picture Learning Kenya (BPL Kenya) operates in a distinct educational space. Unlike conventional secondary schools, it engages primarily with young people after high school—the vast majority of whom live in the informal settlements surrounding Nairobi (Kibera, Kawangware, and Kangemi). Youth come from marginalized backgrounds with limited access to career or educational pathways. Many of these young people have underperformed on Kenya's high-stakes national exams, which often dictate post-secondary options and employment opportunities.

BPL Kenya's flagship initiative, the Kuna Nura Leadership Academy, supports these young adults through a six-month program focused on leadership development, personal growth, and applied learning.

In 2021, **BPL Kenya** began exploring how the **IBPLC** could be adapted to enhance its existing work and provide formal recognition for student growth and competencies.





ADOPTING THE CREDENTIAL

Carol Owala, Executive Director and Co-founder of **BPL** Kenya, identified the **IBPLC** as a mechanism to create alternative pathways for students who may not have thrived under conventional assessments. She initiated contact with the Australian **IBPLC** team in 2021, leading to a collaborative pilot. In 2022, two Kenyan students completed the credential, marking the start of a significant learning and capacity-building journey for the organization.

From the outset, the shift away from exam-based evaluation toward evidence-based assessment required a cultural and pedagogical transition. Traditional Kenyan education emphasizes standardized testing and teacher-assigned grades, with little room for critical questioning or reflection. The **IBPLC**, by contrast, asked educators to justify their assessments of competencies using student artifacts and learning evidence—a significant shift in practice.



Weekly coaching sessions with the Australian team played a vital role in this transition. These meetings provided guidance, reassurance, and skill-building opportunities, enabling the team to develop confidence in the new system. “They would tell us, ‘You’re rating your students too low.’ That support really made us recognize the strengths of our students.”

IMPLEMENTING THE IBPLC: LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE

The first year presented logistical challenges. Even assessing two students required considerable time and effort to gather, curate, and evaluate evidence; however, the process was successful. Group deliberation around student competencies allowed advisors to learn from one another and build a collective understanding of each student’s capabilities. Furthermore, according to Carol, “it steeped the team in **BPL** principles and practices and was great PD for them.”



In 2023, **BPL** Kenya streamlined its approach. Evidence collection was integrated into the Academy's day-to-day activities, and students were encouraged to take ownership of their portfolios. Each student's progress was tracked through a shared digital folder, accessible by both the student and their advisors. This ongoing documentation process proved much more manageable and increased student engagement.

The number of credentialed students grew accordingly: five completed the credential in 2023, and by 2024, that number had increased to 20.

This scaling was supported by staff retention, consistent internal training, and an evolving understanding of the Assessment Frames and the Ruby system.

Program Lead Samantha Nyabola, who joined during the initial pilot, noted the shift.



At first it felt like a lot of work. But now, embedding evidence collection throughout the program and empowering students to participate has made a big difference."

Despite this success, certain learning goals remain harder to evidence within the six-month timeframe. Advisors reported that Personal Qualities and Empirical Reasoning were easier to assess through regular engagement and project work. Quantitative Reasoning has posed challenges, as students typically engaged only with basic financial literacy (e.g., budgeting, profit/loss statements) during the program, and the team found it difficult at times to source other relevant evidence.

PARTNERSHIPS, RECOGNITION, AND SYSTEM-LEVEL CHALLENGES

BPL Kenya has made efforts to engage the Kenyan Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and explore alignment with broader national reforms aimed at competency-based education. Initial meetings were promising, but bureaucratic delays and shifting priorities limited progress. The organization also attempted to partner with Strathmore University, a private Kenyan institution, to explore recognition of the credential; however, time and capacity constraints prevented the development of a formal agreement.



It's on us to pursue these partnerships, but we don't yet have the resources to follow through effectively."

Carol has transitioned from an educator to a strategic leadership role, focusing on fundraising and partnership development. Still, she highlights that a lack of funding remains the central obstacle to scaling the credential and building formal recognition within Kenya's higher education system.

LOCAL VALUE AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

The **IBPLC** has proven valuable for employment. In 2024, five of the 20 credentialed students gained employment directly through their internship placements. It should be noted that each year in Kenya, the formal economy absorbs only about 10% of new entrants, leaving most youth, especially those from low-income communities and young women, to navigate unemployment or engage in precarious informal jobs. Youth account for 84% of Kenya's unemployed, with those aged 15–24 most affected.

In Kenya's social context, formal documentation of achievement—regardless of its alignment with university pathways—holds significant symbolic and practical value. “Kenya is a country that values certificates. Having a credential after high school is important—even more so for those who didn't pass the national exams.” Two students are also exploring the use of their **IBPLC** credentials to apply for further study in Australia, indicating potential future avenues for international mobility.

EQUITY, FAMILY DYNAMICS, AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BARRIERS

Students in the program often face intense economic pressure. Once they turn 18 and receive national ID cards, many are expected to find employment immediately. This economic reality limits their ability to commit fully to the Academy or complete the credential.



Families value education, but when the choice is between school and food, food will always come first.”

Students often live apart from their parents, in informal settlements or with extended family. Many come from households reliant on casual labor,

with little margin for long-term planning. This makes the Academy's work particularly complex—balancing immediate needs with long-term empowerment.

CAPACITY AND SCALING CONSTRAINTS

The demand for the Leadership Academy far exceeds current capacity. The organization can serve 100 students annually, yet only 20 were able to complete the credential in 2024. While there is strong interest from community schools and students, growth is constrained by limited resources and staffing.

Nevertheless, **BPL** Kenya sees the credential's growth trajectory as a success story. From two students in 2022 to 20 in 2024, the evolution demonstrates the feasibility of scaling a complex, evidence-based credential in a low-resource context—if support systems are in place.



We started with two kids. Now it's 20. But real success is when all our students have access to these pathways.”

THE USA EXPERIENCE



OVERVIEW

According to Andrea Purcell, IBPLC Program Director in the USA,



The past year has been one of meaningful growth and learning for the IBPLC, we have expanded our reach, strengthened implementation, and deepened partnerships that will help the IBPLC scale in the years to come. While challenges remain, particularly in streamlining credentialing processes and securing additional funding, we are energized by the momentum, demand, and validation IBPLC is receiving across multiple sectors and thrilled that the IBPLC has been lauded in a number of prominent publications.”

Andrea feels that the work is on the right track with the parallel processes of **“creating proof points of IBPLC implementation in a variety of educational settings”** across the US while concurrently engaging with policy partners **“who can make space for the credential as an accepted measure of secondary achievement.”**

She added:



We are exploring the augmentation of the undergirding technology, and I can foresee a time in the next few years where all these pieces will converge allowing for a rapid scaling of IBPLC availability and usage in the United States.”

Actual and anticipated number of credentials earned by state

State	Sites	2021-2022 Actual	2022-2023 Actual	2023-2024 Actual	2024-2025 Anticipated
New York	4	11	30	45	30
Washington	3	5	12	0	4
Massachusetts	1		5	0	0
California	5	9	41	27	51
Ohio (new)	1				1
Vermont (new)	1				1
Texas (new)	1				4
Total	16	25	88	72	91

The expansion in the US has been accompanied by a growing internal coaching capacity. The **IBPLC** coaching team increased from three to eleven members, alongside ten additional **Big Picture Learning** coaches undergoing active training. The commitment to the **IBPLC** from the **BPL** national team bodes well for future growth and application of the credential. Andrea and Elliot shared that while **IBPLC** usage has grown, there were six pilot sites that, despite being authorized to issue credentials, have not yet been able to do so. The main challenge has been burdensome record-keeping requirements in state-mandated reporting systems.



This can feel like having to keep double books, and this deters schools from issuing credentials even though they are engaging in and valuing the IBPLC process.”

To address this, ways are being explored to streamline documentation and align **IBPLC** processes with existing state and district reporting structures. **“Our goal is to minimize administrative barriers so that issuing credentials becomes a natural extension of student learning rather than an additional burden.”**



The time and effort needed to be trained and the administrative burden that the credential places on new schools can be off-putting, especially where school leadership is not fully committed and educators are not given appropriate time or support. It is a special challenge when schools also have to fulfill state exam requirements and prepare students for standardized tests.

In one particular school, staff were pleased with the quality of the training they received but not with the scheduling; the timing meant that participants often had to leave early or listen into sessions in their cars as they drove to collect their own children. One educator said that

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We were told we were doing the IBPLC, I already had a lot of requirements to meet for the state and there was not a ton of support for us; it was pretty overwhelming, but it's good to see what other schools are doing with it because I love the idea.”

There was consensus in the school that “there should be a staff development course in the summer devoted to **IBPLC** training – it's too difficult to do during the school year when we're not given enough time.” “The other issue is that it's not really recognized in the US now for college; there would be a ton of buy-in if it gets properly approved and it will really help kids.”



Casey Lamb, **BPL** Director for New York state has delivered **IBPLC** training locally since 2022. In spring 2025, she also trained all local **BPL** coaches, so they can support schools and advisors in the future. In order to become authorized, a participant has to take at least one student through the credentialing process to obtain an **IBPLC**.

Casey said that,



There are known challenges when it comes to scheduling regular meetings across schools, and it's unclear where strong inter-school connections will naturally emerge or develop, but it's very beneficial to develop communities of practice around the IBPLC."

In reflecting on the role and purpose of the **IBPLC** in the United States, Casey noted that, while, "it may be a long way off until the **IBPLC** is recognized for college admissions, a number of states are rethinking graduation requirements, and the **IBPLC** has potential to serve as a viable pathway to graduation for students." Additionally, the **IBPLC** training is "a great form of professional development for educators, a helpful way to promote student agency, and a useful tool for capturing **Big Picture Learning** goals." Further, one of its biggest strengths is "you have to know your students, what they're interested in, what they can do - the language of the learning frames forces you to do that."

LAFAYETTE BIG PICTURE HIGH SCHOOL

OVERVIEW

LaFayette Big Picture School in New York offers a unique case because all of its students are now being assessed using the **IBPLC**. It is the only whole **IBPLC** school in the US, and as such presents a great opportunity to understand how it has been implemented and its impact on learning. The experiences of staff and students provide a helpful insight into how to introduce the credential in Year 9, adopt it across a school, and support its development. Data from **BPL** LaFayette also highlights the obstacles that have been faced, shows the level of support needed for schools, and explains how challenges have been addressed and overcome.



Nearby to the Onondaga Nation in the heart of central New York lies LaFayette Big Picture School, a school with a big heart for its students led by principal Susan Hart who exemplifies compassion and care in her leadership. An innovative school, providing a distinctive educational experience for high school students in contrast to conventional learning programs, **BPL** LaFayette was established in 2008 within a larger comprehensive school.



The staff embarked on a mission to transform the learning experiences of students who had previously struggled in conventional schools. Today, it stands as a testament to its staff and the power of personal, interest-driven learning. In addition to serving students who have struggled in other settings, LaFayette **BPL** also attracts students who seek a more active and engaged learning experience. Additionally, approximately half of their students hail from the Onondaga Nation.

The welcome, diversity, and dynamic of the school foster a lively and open learning environment where students inspire and learn from one another, broadening their horizons while belonging to a close-knit community. The school's evolution from a program targeting at-risk youth to a leading choice for students across the district highlights its success in creating an engaging, supportive, and successful learning environment.



LaFayette **BPL** began modestly, accommodating 15 over-aged, under-credited freshmen. These students, largely disengaged from their previous schooling, found themselves in a nurturing environment that prioritized their personal interests and needs. The school's affiliation with the **BPL** network provided a school design centered on personal learning plans, close and caring advisory groups, and immersive real-world internships. This approach connected with learners, leading to the school's expansion and its current status as a respected educational option for students from varied backgrounds.

Even though LaFayette **BPL** deviates from conventional schooling, it has, over the years, garnered academic success with students graduating with a New York State Regents diploma which includes passing five standardized exit exams and earning requisite credits. Since New York does not yet recognize the **IBPLC**, the school is still required to earn all of the New York state requirements while also using the **IBPLC**. "Our students are earning both credentials."

At the core of LaFayette's philosophy is the belief that "education thrives in a community where everyone feels a sense of belonging and purpose." This culture is cultivated through relationships that transcend the classroom and inspire young people to explore new interests and pursue their passions out in the real world.

REAL-WORLD LEARNING

A distinguishing feature of LaFayette **BPL** is its emphasis on real-world learning with students typically spending two days each week out on internships aligned with their interests, gaining valuable hands-on experience and generating social capital. This practical approach familiarizes students with professional environments

and equips them with career-ready skills directly applicable to their current interests as well as their future endeavors. The impact is evident. Real-world internships drive the school program with all kinds of activity, creativity, and projects in evidence on a visit to the school. Students talk about the rigor and relevance of their work, proudly displaying their projects, and often using the language of the **IBPLC** to describe their learning.

The school's commitment to community is evident in its collaborative projects; for example, student-led culinary teams preparing meals for older people or students constructing hydroponic gardens or building gardening structures from scratch to share beyond the school.



These initiatives not only enhance learning but also instill a strong sense of contribution to the broader community. Furthermore, the school welcomes volunteers, including student teachers, family members, Onondaga elders, retirees, and community members, to contribute to various aspects of school life. Volunteers assist with administrative tasks, mentor students, and support student-led projects.

My Senior Thesis Project is planning, serving and preparing desserts and food for the Elder's Luncheon as well as catering. So far I have attended 5 of the Elder's Luncheons held at the Fire Barn on the Onondaga Nation.



I am raising money for a charity called Kaileys Kisses that raises money for grieving children. With the money they raise, they support kids by bringing grieving kids on trips to lift their spirits.

I am doing small engine repair where the only cost is the parts. All of the labor is 100% free.

My senior thesis project is about Every Child Matters, which is an ongoing movement among the Native community.

I lead a group of volunteers to help out Meals on Wheels. I average 2-3 people that I bring to Meals on Wheels.



THE LANGUAGE OF THE IBPLC

The school's decision to incorporate the **IBPLC** across all four years of the program was not a difficult one once leadership understood its sophistication and design, because it was considered "best for all students." One advisor stated:



The school sees that the IBPLC offers an authentic, personalized way of capturing and measuring student learning, the assessments align with our educational philosophy, values, and principles, and the IBPLC helps us facilitate and support a healthy learning environment for all students."

The visit to the school for the purpose of this research was during Exhibition Week when students from each year present their learning. A notable aspect was how often the language of the **IBPLC** could be heard and seen that week with students referring to Social Reasoning or Personal Qualities, advisors discussing the Assessment Frames, and an overall emphasis on 'evidence of learning.'

A catalyst for all the talk of the **IBPLC** was the development of a learning plan linked to digital portfolio platform developed by LaFayette advisor Walt Nowey, one of the first to go through the training. This platform is designed around the **IBPLC** and creates a focus on the Assessment Frames of the

credential. From Years 9 to 12, all the students that were observed used the platform as part of their Exhibitions and made direct reference to their work to indicate their competencies across the six Assessment Frames.

Describing the Exhibition Week, Susan Hart said:



All our students created learning plans using a digital portfolio platform, allowing them to identify both indicators of success and areas they are committed to improving. I was genuinely impressed by many of the exhibitions I attended. The 101s held their inaugural exhibitions, and thanks to public speaking mini-lessons, along with ample practice and newfound confidence, they were outstanding. They presented with poise during their “Who Am I?” exhibitions. Additionally, many of the 201s and 301s exhibited growth as they transitioned to the new learning plans, doing so with a bit of reluctance but ultimately succeeding. The 401s reported in on the progress they are making with their Senior Thesis Projects.”

The language of the IBPLC was heard in other contexts as well, and these quotes from various staff members capture some of it.

In Empirical Reasoning/Intro to Research we dug in deep with electric circuits. Students learned how to interpret and draw basic schematics and build circuits. We also used ammeters to measure current at various points in the circuit and how to wire a voltmeter in parallel to the circuit to collect voltage readings.

Projects are coming along and include building a chair, a refrigerator, decorating a cake, producing a podcast, and putting together a photography exhibit. The 301s are really delving into their learning with connections to the indicators on the IBPLC frames. It’s great to see them thinking about the skills they are developing which will serve them in the future.

This past week we hosted seven members of the Big Picture Learning New York Team. We were able to take them to four internship sites to see the amazing work our students are doing, speak to mentors and observe a site visit check in. Our students were able to speak to the state of their learning plans/portfolios. The LaFayette team was able to reflect on our progress and growth with IBPLC.



The past few weeks have had me toggling between working with students on authentic projects with scientific inquiry as well as preparing for the mid-year Living Environment Regents Exam. I'm sure you can guess what both the students and I enjoyed more. Nevertheless, we did our best and many students put the exam behind them.

Everyone is working to show evidence of learning in the IBPLC frames. The learning frames within their evidence of learning on their plans are beginning to take shape. They are making progress on their projects which will reflect this learning.

Preparing for the ELA regents is a cumbersome task as it's not what measures our students' learning or a prediction of how successful they will be in the future. We take pride as do the students in hands-on learning and

college preparation which will help them to be very productive when they graduate. This has been proven over time with previous advisory students who have done very well after Big Picture schooling.

Exhibitions were really good this trimester. It was definitely a test using the new IBPLC frames and terminology for building a good learning plan and to track learning. That being said, they really did well with it. Learning plans were full of interesting topics. It was fun to see all the new things they came up with.



IBPLC TRAINING

One striking aspect of the training required to be authorized for the **IBPLC** is that whether it is with educators in Barbados, Kenya or at LaFayette **BPL**, participants consistently remarked on how effective it is in instilling **BPL** principles and complementing and facilitating **BPL** practices. Pam Gordon, an **IBPLC** trainer and educational consultant for **BPL**, said,



It's really good for principals to do the training and it's also a fantastic instructional tool that helps people new to BPL grasp the learning goals, especially Quantitative and Empirical Reasoning. I like how the IBPLC respects teachers, honors their judgments and sees them as professionals."

For **BPL** educators who have worked in **BPL** schools for a number of years, they spoke about how the **IBPLC** training reminded them of important features of the **BPL** design and inspired them to enhance their practices and engagement with learners.

Andrea Purcell observed that,



The number one key pillar for administering the credential is a longitudinal and sustained relationship between the person who is issuing the credential and the person who's receiving the credential. In other words, educators really have to know their students."

The need for close relationships with students is no doubt one factor that inspired LaFayette BPL to embrace the IBPLC. As Pam Gordon stated:



Sue (principal of LaFayette) went all-in. I think for the IBPLC to become integral to a school that the leader needs to do the training, preferably alongside an advisor. Where it really happens is when teachers are working with the students; it becomes a different reality, you are learning by doing."

The research visit to LaFayette BPL and the various interviews, focus groups and conversations with staff and students has shown clearly that they are "learning by doing." Of course, the process took much time and effort, not everyone was convinced initially that the IBPLC was worth it, and there are still challenges since the credential is not recognized in the state and by US colleges.

The experience LaFayette has gained from introducing the IBPLC across the entire school shows that 'going all-in' may be a wise way to adopt the credential, that supportive and committed leadership is necessary, and that extra time, patience, and recognition of the value of the IBPLC as a sound, sophisticated, reliable, and comprehensive tool of assessment is needed. But what if you're not a BPL school?



PORT OF LOS ANGELES HIGH SCHOOL (POLAHS)

Port of Los Angeles High School is a non-BPL school that opened 20 years ago and serves about 1,000 students. Its mission is **“to inspire and educate all students by integrating a maritime theme into a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum and pathways in Career Technical Education.”** Michael Aspinwall is the Career the CTE Pathways Advisor at POLAHS and a member of the School Board. In recent years, he has had contact with **BPL** through a number of its initiatives (**Harbor Freight Fellows Initiative, B-Unbound**). He said:



I was introduced to the IBPLC by Andrea (Purcell) and was immediately fascinated by the rubrics. I had students with incredibly unique and diverse experiences and interests, and thought the credential would be an advantage to them.”



Andrea provided the training to Michael who has since trained another member of staff in the **IBPLC** with Andrea’s support. “The process took about a year and a half, and I would describe it as both beneficial and inspiring for the four students that were invited to do the **IBPLC**. Two of them were strong academically, while the other two were not, but all of them ultimately showed similar levels of achievement across the **IBPLC** learning frames.”



Michael saw the benefits of the **IBPLC** and went with it. “I selected those four students because I knew them and their out-of-school experiences offered rich evidence. I didn’t ask for permission—I just started. For the **IBPLC**, we met one-on-one after school and also I’d bring food, sit with them, and listen. Those conversations became a great source for identifying their evidence. Now, this year’s group includes five English Language Learners whose first language is either Spanish or Arabic.”

Michael is an enthusiastic advocate of the **IBPLC** and his own words convey his passion best.



Although I’m from a non-Big Picture Learning school, I found the language of the IBPLC frames clear and precise. It’s not difficult to understand, but it *is* challenging because I wanted to be sure students consistently demonstrated competence, not just a one-time skill.”

“Completing the credential was, in many ways, not that difficult, because I loved doing it, but it did take a lot of time. One unexpected benefit was how strongly students responded to simply knowing

someone at school was deeply interested in them. My advice to other non-BPL schools: just start. Be open. You don't have to know exactly how it will work. Opportunities will present themselves along the way."

Among the many benefits Michael sees with the **IBPLC**, he described how, unlike standardized testing or school-based exams, the credential allows students to demonstrate their skills. "My favorite frame is Quantitative Reasoning (QR) because it allows students to show what they know in their own way—it's incredibly empowering. One student, who struggled in math and was in special education, demonstrated Level 4 in QR by showcasing his work building mini-bikes. He was ready to drop out before engaging with the credential. He even reached Level 4 in Knowing How To Learn by teaching himself to sew a custom bike seat for his grandmother after she found the original one uncomfortable."

A 'champion' for the **IBPLC**, like Michael Aspinwall, shows that there are opportunities for many other non-BPL schools to make use of the credential.

“

I mention IBPLC whenever I can. Our school board was very receptive and excited about what it could offer. They even asked, “Can we do this for all students?” I told them, honestly, I could barely manage four at a time—it takes time and care. Still, I oversee over 230 students in CTE pathways, and I truly believe they would all benefit. I’m passionate about this work because I was a good student who didn’t test well. I only got into college because I could audition. This credential would have made the difference for me—and now I see it doing that for our students.”



OBSERVATIONS

Competency-based assessment in high school is increasingly incorporating digital portfolios and teacher judgment as effective strategies for evaluating student learning. These approaches move beyond traditional testing by providing a more comprehensive and personal view of student competencies. Digital portfolios serve as curated collections of student work that reflect their skills, growth, and achievements over time. They allow students to actively document their learning journey and give teachers a dynamic platform to assess a broader range of competencies, such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration—skills often overlooked by standardized assessments.

Teacher judgment plays a vital role in this design. Educators bring professional insight to the evaluation process, analyzing qualitative data such as student reflections, project artifacts, and demonstrable



learning experiences. This human element is crucial for interpreting complex student work and providing meaningful feedback. The integration of digital portfolios and teacher judgment not only enhances the assessment process but also promotes student engagement by encouraging ownership of learning. In doing so, it supports personalized instruction and recognizes learning that happens beyond the classroom. For colleges and employers,

this method offers a more accurate and compelling picture of a student's readiness for future opportunities—capturing abilities and potential that traditional exams often fail to measure. The **IBPLC** exemplifies this approach, enabling educators to capture relevant, student-centered learning experiences that are grounded in durable skills and real-world experiences.

Implementing the **IBPLC** within the current U.S. education system is complex, requiring a significant shift in both mindset and practice. Teachers will need to move beyond conventional test-based grading to assess students' real-world skills and competencies. Andrea Purcell noted that,



The IBPLC requires a mindset shift—from grading tests to evaluating skills in a real-world context. It's a different way of thinking.”

The shift has led and will lead to heavier workloads for teachers, who must manage both conventional grades and **IBPLC** assessments simultaneously. “The biggest burden is on the teachers. They’re keeping double books, tracking **IBPLC** assessments and regular grades. It’s a lot. “Even if we decide to do something in parallel, we still have a responsibility to help students perform in whatever assessment system is set up.”

Students face similar pressures, navigating the demands of both **IBPLC** and state-mandated exams. Andrea observed:



We’re trying to innovate within a system that isn’t built for innovation,”

pointing to the challenge of integrating progressive approaches into more rigid accountability structures.

Despite these hurdles, the **IBPLC** remains primed to scale and spread, and with only 25–30% of U.S. students attending college, the **IBPLC’s** relevance to workforce readiness is especially important. “We are looking at the **IBPLC** and how using the criteria for **IBPLC** is actually very relevant to workforce entry.” Students build resumes, portfolios, and video statements—practical tools that employers value. As Andrea explained, “The preparation it takes to be able to introduce yourself in a professional, compelling way helps students when they’re presenting themselves for opportunities.” These portfolios serve as “an organized resume of experience, with letters of recommendation from mentors and internships. The preparation students do for the **IBPLC** translates directly into professional readiness.”

Looking ahead, scaling the IBPLC in the U.S. will require both resources and data. According to Andrea,

“

We need to get to closer to 300 students a year before we can have any statistically significant type of statements being made.”

More funding is also critical:

“

We need funding not just for the program itself, but for research that proves the IBPLC’s effectiveness. Without that data, universities won’t move.”

Still, she remains hopeful.

“

We’re in a transition phase. It’s not perfect yet, but we’re seeing glimpses of what’s possible. If we can get more buy-in from universities and policymakers, the IBPLC has the potential to transform education.”

