



CASE STUDY

Bringing our DCSD Portrait of a Learner to Life!

Team Names/Roles:

Shannon Brown-Team lead, Director of Education Services

Leslie Peters- Team lead, Assistant Director of Education Services

Lyndsey Bednar-Professional learning facilitator

April Crandall- High school teacher

Blaine Spires-Elementary school administrator

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Lauren Spires- EPIC instructional coach

Hailey Sebahar- Marketing director and website/social media designer



What is your Design Challenge?

In Douglas County School District we already had a Portrait. It had originally started as a Portrait of a Graduate and had been created by a small group from the EPIC steering committee, pre-Covid. After conversations with stakeholders we determined that we should change ours to a Portrait of a Learner

and should include student voice in the process. We didn't want our Portrait to just be a poster of words on the wall, but instead, a living thing that could be continuously shared with not only our students, staff and families, but also with the greater Douglas County community. We also had discussion that with confusion around EPIC among various stakeholders and the desires of some to see it go away, we needed to really consider how to share the attributes of our Portrait and make sure everyone knew that Empower, Prepare, Inspire and Connect are words we want our learners to be. EPIC is not a thing, but the acronym for our Portrait of a Learner, the philosophy that drives how we do business in DCSD. It encompasses our instructional framework and our Portrait helps give us reasons to focus on practices that embrace positive culture, learner-centered environments and responsive instruction.

Our question was, "How might we bring our Portrait of a Learner to life?" During our initial brainstorming we discussed having a Student Symposium in order to have students consider what it meant to be *Empowered, Prepared, Inspired and Connected*. We discussed creating a Portrait of a Learner website that could always be evolving and highlighting students demonstrating the attributes of our Portrait. Another guiding question that came about because of our team conversation was how we could create additional opportunities to make community connections to help make our Portrait of a Learner even more "real-world."

[Original Portrait of a Learner](#)

[Our Dream Idea](#)

[Link to Figma Website Mockup](#)

Instructions for using the Figma Mockup:

- Hit "R" to restart the animation
- Click the 1st circle (Empower) to begin hero animation (this will be scroll jacked and happen automatically on scroll for the live site)
- Click on the Empower circle again to advance to the next message. This will continue for the 4 messaging areas.

[POAL Style Guide.pdf](#)

[POAL Website Revision.pdf](#)

[POAL Website Revision News Video MindsetSkill Sections.pdf](#)

What did you do?

After returning from the October 2023 convening, our Design Team met to plan out our first steps of making our Portrait of a Learner Student Symposium a reality. We shared our project at our November 2023 Leadership meeting and asked all administrators to consider students in grades 3-11 who could be good representatives for this work. We asked them to consider students who would be willing to share their voice, but not necessarily just the students in leadership type roles. For elementary we asked for a

student from each grade, 3-5, in middle school we asked for a student in each grade, 6-8, and in high school we asked for a student in each grade, 9-11. This gave us representation from each school as well as multiple grade levels which we felt was very important to our work. We also discussed the need to share information about the Student Symposium with our school staff so they were clear on what the Symposium was about and to be transparent with our project and the work that was happening in the district. An email was sent with the “why” of our project and information about the student symposium.

[“We Can Do EPIC Things” Podcast- The One Where We Paint a Portrait of a Learner](#)

[Portrait of a Learner student symposium blurb](#)

[Copy of Student Symposium Permission Slip](#)

We scheduled our Student Symposium for January 31, 2024 and rented a local venue that gave us enough space for all that we planned. Our team collaborated and Hailey designed a Portrait of a Learner logo and we ordered t-shirts and sweatshirts with our newly designed Portrait of a Learner logo and those who participated received a shirt to wear at the event.

At the time of our planning for our student event, we had a regularly scheduled Douglas Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) meeting. At the meeting on January 22 we shared our Portrait of a Learner design project. We had parents review the Portrait of a Learner and collaborate around what they felt Empower, Prepare, Inspire and Connect meant from a parent perspective. We asked them to consider skillsets and mindsets that would be important when demonstrating each of our Portrait’s attributes. Small groups discussed and then added sticky notes to t-charts for each attribute.

[Portrait of a Learner DPAC Meeting Photos](#)

Our Portrait of a Learner Student Symposium was held on January 31. We had 40 students join for this work! The day began with some “would you rather?” questions to help the students get to feel comfortable with each other. Students were then placed into multi-age groups and the attributes of our Portrait of a Learner were shared. Then the fun began! Students were given a design challenge to use only specific materials to create a ramp that would allow a car to travel the farthest distance when tested. Students were given time to collaborate with their team, design and test their ramps. After testing (and giving prizes to the winning team) the groups then considered how they felt empowered, prepared, inspired and connected during the design project. We then took students on a deeper dive and asked them to consider how they experience the Portrait attributes in their individual classrooms and at their schools. Lots of great conversations came about from the group debrief including ways to share our Portrait of a Learner with the greater Douglas County community. Students shared ideas about creating stickers that businesses could have like business cards, wrapping school buses, putting our Portrait information on billboards, making advertisements and sharing on jumbo-trons at sporting events.

[Portrait of a Learner Student Symposium Photos](#)

[Portrait of a Learner Student Symposium Video](#)

[Portrait of a Learner student brainstorm vector posters](#)

[Student Ideas in action](#)

On May 22 we met with 3 students to discuss designs for streetlight flags to be hung down Hwy 395. Students met with 4 members of our design team and discussed flag design, how the flags should be organized and location on the HWY 395 corridor. From this conversation our marketing director will work to finalize our proposal and then our design team, along with students, will present our proposal to the Town of Gardnerville at a board meeting for approval (hopefully!) These students also joined our two “We Can Do EPIC Things” podcast co-hosts to record a podcast about their involvement with our Portrait of a Learner project.

[Banner Images](#)

[Pics/video of students with flag design](#)

Following our Student Symposium our Design Team met and looked at the posters created by the students around what they see in classrooms and/or at school that help them feel Empowered, Prepared, Inspired and Connected. We found themes for each attribute and then added those student-generated thoughts to our original Portrait of a Learner. Our Design Team also worked together to create a list of business owners we wanted to invite to our Community Symposium. Each business partner was sent a letter that shared information about the DCSD Portrait, our project and the invitation to be part of our work.

[Student Ideas on Portrait of a Learner](#)

[Business Partner letter](#)

Following our Student Symposium, we held a district-wide Learning Forum on March 5, 2024. Staff selected 50 minute workshops to attend they felt were relevant to their work in the district. We held a workshop to share the Portrait of a Learner project with various DCSD educators. During this workshop Ernie Rambo shared the work the state has been doing with the Portrait and the Competencies. We then shared information from our Student Symposium and shared the video of students working during their event. We asked workshop participants to consider our 4 attributes of our Portrait and consider the mindsets and skill sets necessary for students. They created t-charts with their ideas. We also had them reflect on the signature practices they have used or seen in their classrooms and/or schools for each of the Portrait attributes and participated in a “Chalk Talk” to record their thoughts.

[Portrait of a Learner Staff Symposium 2024](#)

[Portrait of a Learner Staff Forum Photos](#)

On March 12 we had a district Leadership meeting. During this meeting we shared our progress on our Portrait of a Learner project, including the video from the Student Symposium and ideas students had to promote our Portrait across the community. We then had administrators work together to brainstorm signature practices they have seen in their schools that would support the attributes of our Portrait.

[Portrait of a Learner Leadership Meeting Photos](#)

On March 18 we held our Portrait of a Learner Community Symposium. 14 community partners attended our event from different businesses and NDE. We shared the background of our DCSD Project and then had them participate in a design challenge, working in teams of 3-4 and designing and creating a shoe

with newspaper and tape. Upon completion of the design challenge, teams modeled their shoes and then discussed how the task made them feel empowered, prepared, inspired and connected. We also asked the teams to consider our Portrait attributes and what skill sets and mindsets would be necessary for student success in the workforce. We ended the day with a discussion of how local businesses could support the work of our Portrait project. They shared ideas that included business shout-outs for shining student employees, holding a student symposium at the beginning of each year, having businesses focus on one element of our Portrait at a time (empowered, prepared, inspired, connected,) an EPIC Fun Run, and EPIC banners at businesses that support our Portrait work. Community members shared the importance of helping stakeholders and the greater community see that EPIC and our Portrait is a philosophy of how we do business in DCSD, not a curriculum or set of lesson plans. They also asked us to consider how to continue to share with families so our work can also be supported at home.

[Portrait of a Learner Community Symposium 2024](#)

[Portrait of a Learner-Skillsets and Mindsets](#)

[Portrait Community Outreach](#)

On May 30 we held our Teacher Symposium with about 35 educational staff. Information was shared about the work that had been done with students and the community, then educators joined in a design project, discussed skillsets and mindsets necessary for successful learners and also discussed signature practices occurring in classrooms that offer varied opportunities for students to be Empowered, Prepared, Inspired and Connected.

[Teacher Symposium Invitation and SWAG](#)

[Portrait of a Learner Teacher Symposium 2024](#)

[DCSD Signature Practices](#)

[photos/videos from teacher symposium](#)

The draft competency of collaboration was clearly evident through our project. It started with the multi-age student symposium with students working in cross-grade level teams on a design project with opportunity to reflect on their work and the attributes of our Portrait. The community collaboration was also amazing and it was exciting to see just how excited the adults from various businesses were to learn about our work and be a part of it. Finally, our teacher symposium allowed for PreK-12 grade teachers and specialists to engage in re-education of their understanding of EPIC learning and share ideas about mindsets and skillsets and signature practices that aligned with our Portrait, learners who are empowered, prepared, inspired and connected.

[Teacher Symposium Reflections connected to Collaboration](#)

What was the biggest surprise/barrier in implementation?

What was the impact?

Our team was surprised by the level of engagement by participants who attended our Community Symposium. The community members were very involved in learning more about the Portrait of a Learner and had great ideas for how this could look in the community and/or at their business.

Community members were excited to support this type of learning and want it to be a continual partnership. As our team spent more time working with the students, community and teachers we grew even more excited as our project progressed and we considered even more possibilities that we had even considered at the beginning of our work!

[Portrait Community Outreach](#)

[Community Symposium Quotes](#)

[Portrait of a Learner Community Symposium Photos](#)

What was the greatest success? How did this success impact young people or how might it impact young people on your campus? What are their perceptions?

Our greatest successes of our project so far would be the Student, Community and Teacher Symposiums. We anticipated some good feedback from these three events, but what actually happened was so much better than we ever imagined. Watching students work in multi-age groups on a design project, then reflecting on our Portrait attributes was amazing. We had the same feeling with our community business owners. Being able to share our Portrait with them and have them consider the attributes from a community lens allowed for great conversation among the participants and they really dove into skill sets and mindsets necessary for students to possess as community members. Our Teacher Symposium allowed us the opportunity to share our work with the Student and Community Symposiums and to truly re-educate the teachers about the alignment of our Portrait of a Learner-Empower, Prepare, Inspire and Connect, with the instructional work we are doing in Douglas County School District. Feedback from teachers has shown that they appreciated the clarification and have a better idea of how to speak to the work with colleagues back at their sites.

Students who attended shared many feelings about how they felt about the event and being a part of it. They also shared ways they see the Portrait of a Learner within classrooms. Giving them opportunities to consider being empowered, prepared, inspired and connected allowed them to collaborate with people they had just met and learn a little more about themselves as learners. From their work we were able to revise our Portrait of a Learner to include student voice into the dispositions. Students also being able to share ideas on how to bring our Portrait of a Learner to the greater community allowed their voices to be heard and to feel like what they have to say is important.

[DCSD Portrait of a Learner](#)

[DCSD 23-24 School Year EPIC Photos + Highlights](#)

[Student Symposium Quotes](#)

[Community Symposium Quotes](#)

What's next? How does your team plan to evolve this work? What are the most significant pieces of learning you see impacting adult work and young people's experiences? What school level, district level, state level policy may need to be addressed?

As far as State Level Policy we need to look at attendance and how we take and measure attendance. Seat time does not equate to productivity time. At the District level we need to discuss how to scale up the work and dovetail it into our professional development plan long term with our work on best practices via our Instructional Framework which will in turn affect school level PLC time.

Our planned rollout through the teacher symposium and next year through our PDC/site avenues are a good starting point for equipping teachers to implement effectively. We want teachers to interact with the Portrait of a Learner and connect the identifiers to what they are doing in their classrooms. We plan on taking the approach in the fall with staff of, "here's what we're already doing well and where we want to go next." Our plan is to use the signature practices for this as we share our work district-wide and help teachers see what is already happening in classrooms around our district and specific practices they can consider when planning lessons that will align with the experiences we want for our PreK-12 learners.

We have also discussed the need to do an introduction of our Portrait of a Learner to parents at all schools (as recommended by parents in the community group) as well as a kick off at every school starting at the beginning of the year- mixing grade levels and having the students work on a design challenge together, which will really build that school community and familiarize our students with the attributes we want them to experience, being *empowered, prepared, inspired* and *connected* learners.

In talking with a DCSD middle school teacher about her pottery students helping first graders make pinch pots, she had an ah-ha. She mentioned that some students were very reluctant to get started on their project and some wouldn't even touch the clay. When she explained that they would be helping first grade students, the reluctant students immediately got to work and were the most eager for the project. It made her realize that as soon as they felt like they had a purpose, they were empowered to do their best so they could be a role model and teacher for the younger students.

This example also aligns with the feedback we heard from students regarding the Student Symposium and the opportunities they had to work with students of other ages and grade levels. Several shared they were nervous at first, but it ended up being one of their favorite parts of the day. It definitely gives us something to share with our teachers for their consideration when thinking about how they create opportunities for multi-grade learning and collaboration. We need to consider how we can create experiences for all our students that allow them to have agency over their education, feeling safe to share their voices and empowered.

We need to begin considering assessment designed to guide students towards mastery of content and skill standards through choice driven tasks .As we shift towards more widespread student-driven assessment we would benefit by being very intentional about equipping teachers to design tasks that empower students to prove their learning in a manner that suits their learning strengths, while also establishing a classroom environment/ workflow expectations/ SOPs that are productive to the learning of all students.

Classroom management for this style of learning can be daunting as it sometimes needs to include “messy” learning, but also needs to have the equilibrium to ensure that quiet learners have an equal opportunity for success on their assessments. With this idea of assessment design, there also needs to be consideration of “seat time” and how we really can know what a student has learned.

Our use of priority standards, unpacking those standards, and creating skill-specific learning progressions helps to create environments focused on learning. Conversations with students about their progress and evidence in their data notebooks also helps teachers see that assessment is about learning and not an overall grade. Assessment should not be a surprise for students and we need to use a systematic approach so that both teachers and students have clarity about expectations for learning. We also need to be willing to look at a variety of professional environments in order to get ideas about what assessment can look like.

[Unpacked Standards and Learning Progressions for Student and Teacher Clarity Roadmaps & Data Notebooks](#)

Another important piece of assessment is to begin looking at the process of learning and not just the final product. Ideas like student exhibitions could allow students to share the steps they went through in completing tasks and opportunities to share deeper learning that occurred along their learning journey.

Research + Resources that inspired and informed our thinking

Having a design team has allowed for lots of collaboration around our district Portrait of a Learner. The timeline and team and lead check-ins were beneficial as it kept our team and our work on track. Being able to work with our coaches, Pam and Ira, has been an invaluable piece of our project work. Our meetings with them have been inspirational and they truly took care to check in and ask about where we were and what questions we had around our work. They met us where we were when offering suggestions and things to consider and helped our team see how this important work can continue past our original project. We are hopeful to continue our connection and work with them next year.