VIDA for Life

A Q&A with Vista Innovation & Design Academy

March 2022
“Schools can either disrupt or perpetuate the status quo. Your birth certificate is not the story of your life.”

— Eric Chagala, Principal, VIDA Middle School
In August, 2014, Washington Middle School became VIDA, a magnet middle school serving learners in grades six through eight. According to Eric, the name is both an acronym for Vista Innovation & Design Academy and the Spanish word vida, which means life. In this way, the name reflects the school’s focus on developing the whole person and preparing students for success in their “vida after VIDA.” Today VIDA provides learners with a community-defined and culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning based on design thinking. With its unique character, the school exemplifies VUSD’s commitment to supporting many and varied models to flourish within the shared goal of personal learning.

Eric Chagala, EdD
Founding Principal of the Vista Innovation & Design Academy (VIDA)

When Vista Unified School District (VUSD) embarked on its journey to transform learning, Washington Middle School took a place at the forefront of the district-wide change effort. In 2013, as a result of persistently low performance on achievement tests, the school, which primarily served Latinx students from low-income households, was poised for state takeover under the provisions of No Child Left Behind.

“Washington Middle” as such did cease to exist, but it was not taken over. Instead, it transformed itself, for and with the staff and students who were already there, district leaders like then-superintendent Devin Vodicka, innovators from the Stanford d.school, and a new principal named Eric Chagala. They recognized that the why for the school’s failure was irrelevance and that “school” as it had manifested itself in the past was, in Eric’s words, “what was done to Latinx students by a bunch of White adults.” So the Washington Middle School community reimagined and redesigned virtually every aspect of the program in order to engage learners with empathy, creativity, and a culture of innovation.

In August, 2014, Washington Middle School became VIDA, a magnet middle school serving learners in grades six through eight. According to Eric, the name is both an acronym for Vista Innovation & Design Academy and the Spanish word vida, which means life. In this way, the name reflects the school’s focus on developing the whole person and preparing students for success in their “vida after VIDA.” Today VIDA provides learners with a community-defined and culturally responsive approach to teaching and learning based on design thinking. With its unique character, the school exemplifies VUSD’s commitment to supporting many and varied models to flourish within the shared goal of personal learning.

Here, Eric tells the story of VIDA’s transformation and how the school fosters innovation and creativity among learners and adults alike.
What was your ‘why’ for leaving your position as assistant principal at Vista High School to take on the challenge of transforming Washington Middle?

[At Vista High] I spent a lot of time in way too many conversations with moms, typically through a translator, about their students going to rehab, pregnant, leaving for a continuation school, fights, drugs, any number of negative issues an assistant principal at a poor, large high school would deal with. And so, probably a year in, or year two, the translator and I looked at each other after a meeting and started having this discussion around, “I wonder if there’s any commonality about when these parents feel like they lost their kids.” And moms typically were able to recount that back to middle school and specifically about seventh grade when they thought about it. And so my thoughts came around to, “Why am I sitting at high school, when it sounds like middle school is when we are losing particularly low-income Latinx students?”

My dissertation was on high-achieving Latinx youth, so Washington spoke to my heart. It really spoke to what I wanted to be and where I wanted to be. And I knew that the superintendent at the time, Devin Vodicka, was working toward trying to re-imagine the school in some way.

VIDA uses the design thinking process to nourish creative thinking skills that will empower students to apply what they learn and create non-traditional solutions to yesterday’s, today’s, and tomorrow’s problems.
How did the transformation from Washington to Vista Innovation & Design Academy unfold?

Devin [Vodicka] had already done the hard work of explaining to the teachers that something was going to have to change. They didn’t know what it was, only that the new principal was going to work with them on figuring it out. At the time, Jo Boaler, the mathematics education professor at Stanford University, was doing a lot of growth mindset work with our director of math at the district. Jo had a very close relationship with three teachers at Washington Middle School and knew that these teachers were willing to try anything around new math, so to speak, because they could see how disengaged kids were in the traditional fashion.

When the [math] teachers explained to Jo what we were trying to do, she said, “You guys should look up something called the d.school at Stanford University. They have a really unique problem-solving process built around creativity and empathy. And I think it’d be a perfect process for you to use.” So this was nine years ago, before “design thinking” was a buzzword and all popular. I had just come on, but we checked it out. We liked it. So we used the design thinking change process to help reimagine the school.

We had to start with things we needed: a vision, a mission, and values. We had 98 percent faculty attendance to those types of after school sessions, voting for those things, and feedback sessions. Our leadership team was called the Magnet Steering Committee. There were seven teachers on the committee, and they were voted on by their peers and the union. Student engagement had to be our first priority, and the key was empathy—walking in the shoes of others. We talked to students, to alumni, to the owner of the 7-Eleven on the corner.

We were impressed by the impossible amount of creativity and energy that the design thinking process brought out in teachers. I was impressed by the camaraderie and culture. And so we decided to turn [design thinking] into pedagogy. VIDA was going to focus on the arts, STEM, humanities, and wellness. And a culture of innovation. We share a fundamental belief that the mind can be trained to be more creative—where creativity and skills come together is innovation.

That founding team of seven prepared slide decks and presentations for what design thinking in the content areas would look like—in humanities, STEM, and electives. All of the middle schools in our district have one hour every Monday of (teacher) collaboration time. They would do presentations during that. They would talk about it. And those were the touchpoints for a lot of the faculty.

So teachers had a year of planning, so to speak. By planning, I mean that after working at a really hard school all day long, they would then at night go try and figure it out and have late meetings and plan. One of the reasons why we get a lot of attention is we’re not a brand new shiny building that got to hire teachers. We’re not a charter that just kind of pops up and works its own rules. We’re a district school with a teacher’s union, where the transformation was with the same teachers in the same building with the same kids matriculating through.

After the last day of Washington Middle School ever, the next day we started a three-day training for project-based learning (PBL), which provided a curricular structure for design thinking, which could have been very nebulous otherwise. We spent a lot of time those first three years doing training and looking at different ways of implementing [design thinking]. We gave teachers latitude and talked about how you could integrate mindsets and dispositions of true brainstorming and gathering empathy, the right way to interview and do observations. You could do character analysis in English language arts, and get really deep by talking about empathy and observation and making inferences. Maybe in science, prototyping was really easy for you. Well, there’s methodology around that. So teach the methodology that we’re talking about.

And then we’re required to have six [professional learning] days a year by the district calendar. We don’t do school on those days. We have design challenges, on-the-job training for teachers to actually go through the whole process of design thinking and to ensure that students are getting the opportunity to put all the [design thinking] pieces together into actual design challenges. And now we’re eight years in. Teachers are doing design challenges all over the place and in all sorts of content areas.
How does VIDA support student engagement and relevance?

When I got here, only 18 percent of students had electives. It was really popular at that time to have kids doing interventions upon interventions upon interventions. Washington Middle School had actually reduced the number of minutes in each period and included an additional ninth period in the day for all students. So that more interventions could be available. And one of the things that data told me is that there was an inverse relationship between the increase in academic interventions that were being forced upon kids and actual academic achievement. So interventions were going up, yet achievement was going down, and all the while discipline was going up. It was all out of whack and made no sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essentially, when you talk about the "school-to-jail pipeline," we were a construction project for that, and it’s not sense. Essential...
And teachers must also be engaged. They must be excited. They must have the opportunity to do something that they’ve always wanted to do with kids that they’ve not been allowed to do. With that mantra, we’ve had teachers invent these really fun classes. And so by tending to the souls of the adults, we serve the needs and the interests of the students.

That first year we saw a 92 percent reduction in suspensions and we saw, I think, a 76 percent reduction in classroom referrals. So we’ve gotten away with it every year since we opened, that every single kid has gotten one of these awesome classes.

If we look at VIDA’s arc of learning, we have two axes. One is sophistication. One is time. Over time, we want kids to know and use their strengths, interests, and values, building their own personal brand of, “Who am I? What have I done? And what can I do because I did it?” And then, “What do I aspire toward?” And so that culminates for most of the kids in their eighth grade resume. This is about your life and who you are. If, at the end of the day, this is just school and [the resume] is not more about their lives and who they are, we have failed. If they put “English eight, I got a C plus,” or “I read Tom Sawyer,” then we have failed. The resume is a very visible way of seeing that. It’s a great internal reminder of what you’re working so hard toward and to see what they can do.

Listen to the Podcast

Click here to listen to VIDA’s podcast about Electives.

Learn More
Link to sample resume for Camille >>

Learn More
Link to sample resume for Luz >>
What do you want “visitors” to VIDA to understand about learning transformation?

I think one of the takeaways that we had was when we started doing tours. So before COVID, we were running—between families and educators—about a thousand people through the school year as visitors. We didn’t catch it at first, but they wanted the box: “So who is the vendor?” “What’s the professional development plan?” “How many years of roll-out?” All these things. As if they think there’s some weird magic thing that we have, and they want to know what it is. And we didn’t understand it because we had made it all up. And so people would get visibly frustrated, like, “Why am I here then if there’s not something that you can direct me to?”

And so what I share with them is that we used a process and that process is design thinking. It is human centered, centered on empathy. It was deeply ethnographic. And we suggest you use that type of human-centered process to discover what is best for your school and your community and how to do it.