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OpenBadges HĀSTAC

Open Badges Case Study
February 2014
Working Document

Providence After School Alliance (PASA)

Pathways for lifelong learning
http://mypasa.org/ and http://hubprov.com/

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Providence After School Alliance's (PASA) badge system is tightly integrated into its mission to expand and improve quality expanded learning opportunities (ELO) for Providence youth by organizing and managing a citywide system that offers multiple pathways for learning. With support from the Providence Public School District and other agencies, PASA's middle school initiative the AfterZone is provided by over 70 community-based organizations and serves 40% of youth in participating schools, engaging them in a variety of activities to spark their curiosity, connect them to real world experiences, and allow them to explore their interests. Since its launch, nearly 20 cities have implemented elements of the AfterZone model. Building on the success of the AfterZone, PASA and 10 community partners created The Hub, and Debate. Each ELO is aligned with National Common Core standards and has been approved by the Providence Public School District.

As one of the 30 winners of the The Badges for Lifelong Learning Competition, PASA's Pathways for Learning Badges provided an exciting and forward-thinking opportunity to document, track, and validate ELO experiences from middle school through high school graduation. The badge system aims to recognize, motivate, validate, and connect students' learning interests and achievements. By creating a system of connected learning pathways, PASA aims to guide youth through middle school, high school, and onward to college, careers and life. PASA's initial goal for their badges was to create a comprehensive system of dedicated learning pathways for 6th through 12th graders. Badges would be used to connect middle and high school systems, as well track and nurture student learning and professional interests beginning in the 6th grade. While that goal remains intact, PASA has shifted the timeline, focusing their immediate attention instead on ensuring that the high school badges are connected to the relevant and important high quality afterschool experiences. This could create a strong foundation of high quality badges from which pathways can be built in the coming years.
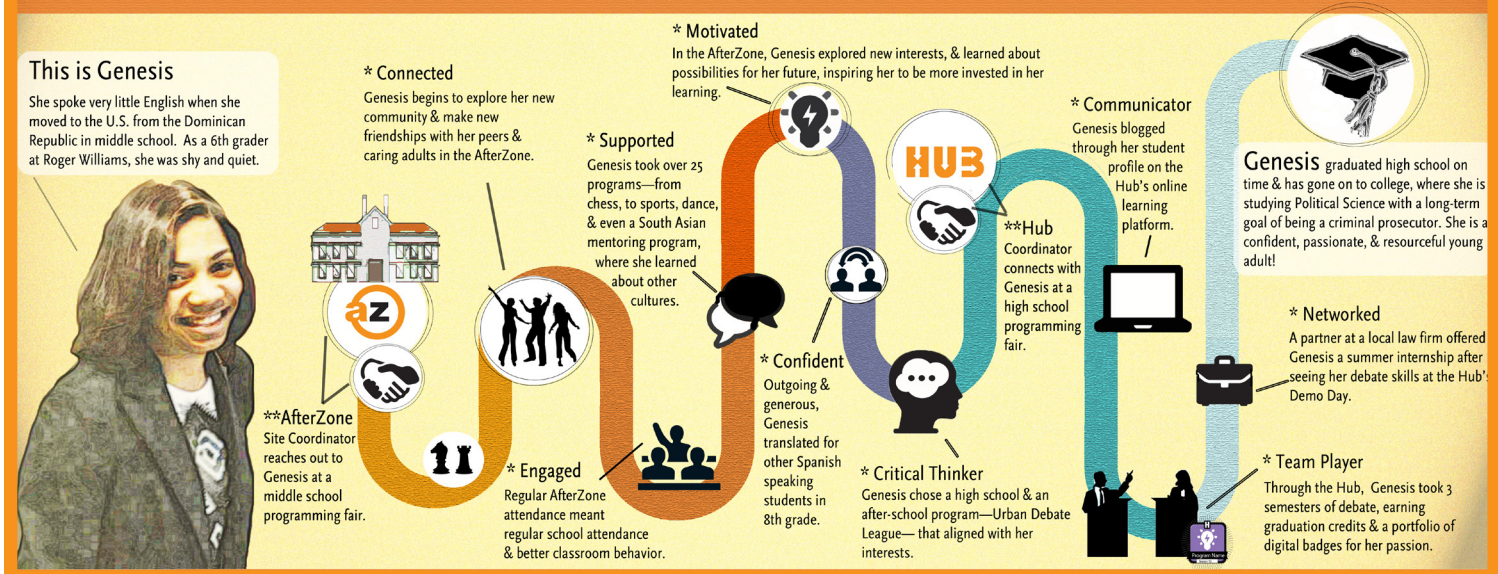
One of the key lessons learned through this process is that educators and industries are more inclined to adopt badges if the badges being developed are tied to quality experiences. Creating badges that more concretely showed what students were learning in real time and connected to the Hub's student outcome goals allowed PASA to roll out badges much more quickly. In this way, PASA's badges were seen as having more value and meaning than mere digital "trophies," which fast-tracked their acceptance by PPSD (the Providence Public School District) and by Rhode Island College, who agreed to accept PASA's badges as part of their application process.

Currently PASA's badges recognize participation (attendance), skill, and evidence of course credit. Future badges include creation of pathways based on learning "themes" (e.g. STEM, art and design, etc.). As part of this long-term plan, PASA is in discussion with local business industry leaders about how to connect workforce skills to future badge pathways designs.

TYPE OF BADGE SYSTEM:

- our badges align to national standards
- learning is assessed by experts
- badges count as formal academic credit
- peer feedback is built into the badge system
- badges have value with external institutions
- learners can choose their own learning pathway and trajectory

PASA's Learning Pathways: Ushering Students from Middle School Through High School Graduation

This is Genesis
She spoke very little English when she moved to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic in middle school. As a 6th grader at Roger Williams, she was shy and quiet.

*Connected
Genesis begins to explore her new community & make new friendships with her peers & caring adults in the AfterZone.

*Supported
Genesis took over 25 programs—from chess, to sports, dance, & even a South Asian mentoring program, where she learned about other cultures.

*Motivated
In the AfterZone, Genesis explored new interests, & learned about possibilities for her future, inspiring her to be more invested in her learning.

**AfterZone
Site Coordinator reaches out to Genesis at a middle school programming fair.

*Engaged
Regular AfterZone attendance meant regular school attendance & better classroom behavior.

*Confident
Outgoing & generous, Genesis translated for other Spanish speaking students in 8th grade.

*Critical Thinker
Genesis chose a high school & an after-school program—Urban Debate League— that aligned with her interests.

*Communicator
Genesis blogged through her student profile on the Hub's online learning platform.

**Hub
Coordinator connects with Genesis at a high school programming fair.

Genesis graduated high school on time & has gone on to college, where she is studying Political Science with a long-term goal of being a criminal prosecutor. She is a confident, passionate, & resourceful young adult!

*Networked
A partner at a local law firm offered Genesis a summer internship after seeing her debate skills at the Hub's Demo Day.

*Team Player
Through the Hub, Genesis took 3 semesters of debate, earning graduation credits & a portfolio of digital badges for her passion.

Q&A with Hillary Salmons, Executive Director, PASA

Tell us about your badge system. What were your original goals for your badge system, and how have they changed as you progressed?

The Providence After School Alliance's "Pathways for Lifelong Learning" badge system aims to recognize, motivate, validate, and connect students' learning interests and achievements, creating a seamless system of learning pathways that usher youth through middle school, high school, and onward to college, career and life.

PASA is issuing badges to acknowledge 21st century skills such as problem solving, self-efficacy, communication and team building. The badges link after-school learning to career and college readiness by creating pathways that incorporate experiential and hands-on learning as well as that which occurs in the classroom.

The badges are leveled, meaning that certain badges unlock access to other opportunities,

and allow students to further track and shape their learning. In terms of assessment, the badges are primarily evaluated by mentors, community instructors, industry leaders and more, but there are also opportunities for self- and peer-assessment.

PASA's initial goal for the badges was to create a comprehensive system of dedicated learning pathways from 6th-12th grade. Badges were going to be used to connect the middle and high school systems, as well as to track and nurture student learning and professional interests beginning in 6th grade.

While that goal remains intact, PASA shifted the timeline, focusing their immediate attention on ensuring that the high school badges are connected to, support, and publicly showcase the relevance and importance of high quality after-school experiences. PASA's goal was therefore to create a strong foundation of high quality badges off of which pathways could be built in the coming years. (HASTAC Q+A)

Lessons learned in developing the badge system:

- Gain a thorough understanding of digital badge concepts
- Familiarize stakeholders with badges early and often throughout the design process
- It's challenging to integrate badges with existing technological platforms and systems
- Figure out where and how your learners will display the badges
- Build badge relevance and demand early (I.E. employers, college admissions)

Tell us more about the process of creating your badge system. How did you get started? What are your next steps and goals for the future?

PASA's badges and their criteria are tied to the overall student outcomes goals for PASA's high school initiative, The Hub. PASA works with providers and teachers to develop Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) that help students become more engaged, dedicated and collaborative in their learning. These ELOs are developed with 21st Century skills, which align to national work readiness standards, and ongoing program assessment in mind, ensuring the highest possible quality of experience through a strategy that holistically addresses the developmental, academic, and employment-related needs of Providence youth.

By tying the badges to these standards and using them as a way to publicly display the high quality experiences youth are engaged in, badges ensure that educators, potential employers, and policy-makers take not only expanded learning experiences seriously, but also the use and potential of digital tools to connect school, work, and life. (HASTAC Q+A)

The Hub's student outcomes goals, and the badges PASA has developed out of these, are based in competency, specifically related to 21st century 'soft' skills such as problem solving, resilience, teamwork, and so forth. PASA is considering the development of programs that address Common Core standards and badges that relate to those, and are working with the Office of Career and Technical Education in Providence to explore these.

Evidence is crucial to PASA for badge meaning and value - the team behind PASA's badge system are looking into the possibility of linking badges to types of experiences such as teamwork or team building, in order to showcase more fully the capabilities and achievements of youth participating in PASA's programs.

What are the next steps and goals for the future of your badge system?

PASA still plans to grow its badge system

into a series of pathways beginning in 6th grade. In preparation, PASA is slowly expanding the number of badges offered, focusing on those that "are measured and have meaning" - PASA does not want badges to lose meaning as they increase in number. After beginning with one high school in 2011, the badge system was expanded to include a second high school in 2012 and another two in 2013.

The long-term goal of the ELO initiative and badges is to become a district-wide strategy. The district has been a critical partner

> **After beginning with one high school in 2011, the badge system was expanded to include a second high school in 2012 and another two in 2013.**

in making sure that badges are woven into the fabric of the ELO strategy. Despite considerable technical and financial hurdles that prevent schools themselves from adopting digital badges, the district supports and promotes their use as part of the ELO initiative, recognizing their ability to bridge education, life, and professional aspects of students' lives. PASA is currently searching for additional funders to help offset the burden on schools.
Finally, Rhode Island College is officially accepting PASA's digital badges as part of their application process, creating a way for students to use their badges to diversify their application. RIC's acceptance of the badges also validates them as legitimate proof of skills gained and learning done in nontraditional education settings.

What were some of the challenges you faced in this process? How did you overcome them?

There were certain elements of the badge system design process that provided considerable challenges, including widespread lack of knowledge or awareness of digital badging among external stakeholders, and limited technology and human resources. The majority of the badging process in-

volved simply familiarizing stakeholders with badges as a concept and exploring the implications of badging within our work. Additional challenges have been encountered due to the limited scope of badge services and software.

PASA's initial goal for the badges was to create a comprehensive system of seamless learning pathways for students from 6th through 12th grade. However, during the early stages of the design process, "it became clear that it would be untenable to create a holistic ecosystem of badges that incrementally built learning pathways." So rather than going with their initial "leveling up" approach, the PASA team re-focused on creating badges that more concretely showed what students were learning in real time and that were connected to the Hub's student outcome goals. This allowed them to roll out badges much more quickly, while ensuring that they were intentionally connected to PASA's nationally-recognized, high quality system. In this way, PASA's badges were immediately recognized as having value and meaning, which fast-tracked their acceptance by PPSD (the Providence Public School District), and by Rhode Island College —who began accepting PASA's badges as part of their application process. (HASTAC Q+A)

To ensure that badges meet their maximum potential, PASA will need to continue to build its technical infrastructure, as well as its partnerships. Additionally, because digital badges are still a largely unknown tool, broader success of the project hinges on educators, policy-makers, and industry leaders understanding what badges are and how they can be used, and adopting them on a large scale. Such understanding will take a considerable amount of coverage that familiarizes the public with badges as a strategy.

In order for PASA's badge system to succeed, the badges need to be connected to real life benefits and high quality experiences. Currently, "students see badges as the icing on the cake of an engaging, hands-on learning system that garners them unique opportunities for credit accumulation." For the badges themselves to be truly successful as a strategy, they will need to not only be tied to experiences, but to tangible benefits—such as internship and job opportunities—as well as taken into account by college admissions officers.

As PASA's badge system expands and the number of badges being earned grows, the team will need to ensure the technical infrastructure behind the system can continue to support it through expansion of the high school programs and potential district-wide initiatives.

If you knew then what you know now, what would you have done differently? What advice would you have for someone thinking about implementing Open Badges?

In order for educators and the workforce to begin to adopt badges, the badge system has to be designed so that the badges are tied to quality experiences, not simply used as digital "trophies." If we were to start over, building badge relevance and demand would have begun the design process. PASA would have hosted a "badging summit" to get all stakeholders familiar with and on the same page about the use of badges. Further, we would have pulled industry leaders into the conversation earlier to ensure the badge design was immediately relevant to their needs.

Breakthrough Fall '13

> **PASA believes that its approach to badging— which recognizes that badges must be tied to assessments, student outcomes, program quality, and workforce skills—will help to set the standard for how the badge ecosystem can not only impact the learning experience for individual young people, but also how it can help to bridge the very different worlds of public education and the contemporary workforce.**

COMMUNITY REACTION

How has your community reacted to the implementation of badges? How will this feedback affect your future involvement with badges?

PASA's badge system has already garnered a great deal of attention from local higher education institutions, as well as from the entrepreneurial and tech communities as a way to measure and validate non-traditional learning experiences. As a result of the badges being tied to PASA's trusted, high quality system, *several learners have been offered jobs and internships after employers see the criteria and skills acquired that the students' badges represent.* This is an exciting indicator of success for PASA's team, and provides incentive for the team and for badge earners to support the growth of the badge system.

For More Information:
http://bit.ly/QA-PASA | http://bit.ly/ED-PASA

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Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory

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