

Bristol Tennessee City Schools, Case Study

Summer 2022

Districts in Tennessee that received funding through the Innovative High School Models Grant have shared summaries of their work along with lessons learned along the way.

The Innovation

For years, Bristol Tennessee City Schools (BTCS) had been considering how it could adjust the support it was providing to the approximately 10 percent of its high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors who persistently struggle to succeed academically, attend school consistently, and, ultimately, graduate on time. They realized that, in many cases, they were asking even more of these students academically — enrolling them in additional credit recovery courses on top of their academic course load, where they were already struggling to succeed. Using a combination of attendance records and credit accumulation, alongside recommendations from guidance counselors — particularly working to identify students who reported having anxiety and believed they would benefit from a closer environment and smaller class sizes — the district identified an initial group of 85 students they believed would be most at risk for not graduating on time.

With this data in hand, BTCS applied for a High School Innovation Grant with a proposal that worked to reimagine an alternative high school experience for these students through a newly established Viking Academy — an off-site program for students who are struggling with credit accumulation and attendance or who are facing life circumstances that have created barriers to consistent engagement in a traditional high school. At Viking Academy, students:

- Continue to focus deeply on rigorous academic content to ensure credit recovery with more individualized instruction in English, math, science, and social studies, and
- Have increased access to specialized instruction, coursework, and work-based learning experiences in high-demand career fields that include the automotive, MEP (mechanical, electrical, plumbing), agriculture, and HVAC industries.

To build on these existing opportunities, BTCS grounded their grant proposal on the following innovations:

- **Time And Space:** Upon announcement of the grant opportunity, BTCS began to envision the newly donated Friendship Career Center as the location of their off-campus Viking Academy — a recently gifted building from a local business partner and district community partner. The building had previously been used as a Volvo dealership and was already equipped with shop bay lifts, making it an ideal location for this program. Identifying an off-campus location for this program was also an intentional decision to signal to students

and the community that the Viking Academy program is an investment in students and a positive opportunity to make deeper connections to workforce and postsecondary experiences. It would also offer students a smaller campus experience in which to engage in coursework and deepen relationships with peers and staff.

- **Partnerships:** BTCS began their work by ensuring all critical voices were at the table to design the Viking Academy model, including: the CTE Director, the secondary supervisor, a student services provider, the middle school principal, and key community members to represent the needs and priorities of Bristol City more broadly. In terms of partnership with a postsecondary institution, BTCS is working with the local TCAT and Northeast State Community College to certify Tennessee High School CTE teachers as adjunct faculty at these institutions. This will allow Tennessee High School faculty to provide dual enrollment opportunities for students at a greatly reduced cost.
- **Modes Of Learning:** Students enrolled in Viking Academy are placed into cohorts of 12-14 students to ensure core content teachers are able to provide students with more individualized support. Viking Academy offers additional experiences and supports for students that are not a part of traditional high school programming, including: multiple in-person TCAT trips, career assessment surveys, transportation to get students' driver's licenses, and other supports. Additionally, after a year of attendance at Viking Academy, if students catch up on credit attainment, they have the choice to reenroll at Tennessee High School. Viking Academy is meant as a support, and students may need or want to participate in it for different amounts of time.

By enrolling students in these courses, BTCS works to put more students on the path to earning a credential in one of these areas or to continue their learning in these fields through a two-year degree program at a local community college or Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT).

The Grant

Bristol Tennessee City Schools was awarded \$2,000,000 for this innovation. The district has allocated funds to:

- Hire a full-time on-site administrator to oversee the management of the staff and programming
- Hire a career coach to administer career assessment surveys and support students in responding to their results
- Purchase automotive diagnostic equipment
- Purchase furniture for the building intended to create collaborative spaces for students to work together
- Purchase equipment for the district's agricultural program — which was also envisioned in this grant
- Purchase an activity bus and two vans to support transportation from Viking Academy to work-based learning sites

Lessons Learned

Bristol Tennessee City Schools has learned several key lessons over the first year of implementation around how to strategically staff their program and engage the community.



- **Engage and invest the community early in the vision and goals of the grant.** The support of the community has been central to the success of Viking Academy. As the vision for Viking Academy began to take shape, district staff met with community and business leaders to invest them in the goal of using the Friendship Career Center and its resources to support students who were struggling the most with the traditional high school model. Leaders began to understand the potential regional impact of investing in these students and in their academic and professional success as a way to also elevate the overall community and workforce. BTCS has also worked to foster a strong relationship with the city of Bristol, such that the school resource officer (SRO) salary for the program is paid for by the city. Similarly, the career counselor position for Viking Academy is contributed by a local business partner. These strong partnerships are reducing the overall cost of this program and are critical to its success.
- **Dedicate the necessary capacity to design, implement, and manage the work.** The administrator of Viking Academy is a full-time position and has been given the ownership and time to fully manage all aspects of the program, including: hiring, community engagement, data and financial management, and construction oversight. This has allowed the program to remain focused and on track during its launch year.
- **Staff your program thoughtfully.** Identifying teachers who have a passion for students who need more support to be successful is of paramount importance. Not only do the teachers at Viking Academy need to have deep content expertise, they also need to be relationship-oriented and ready to dedicate capacity to deepening bonds with students quickly. These are not the kind of roles that should be assigned. These are roles that should be offered to and staffed by teachers who are eager to engage in this work.

Sustaining The Work

Viking Academy plans to enroll 75 students for the 2022-23 school year. They have engaged all of them in a conversation about the program and almost every student is excited about attending. BTCS believes their commitment to sharing about the work and clearly communicating the opportunities provided by the program have been key to its enrollment success. They have also been cost neutral with the majority of their staffing decisions by:

- Identifying core subject area teachers for English, math, science, and social studies who were excited about transferring to the program
- Funding the salary of an HVAC instructor by not refilling a retired teacher position for an audio/visual course where enrollment had been shrinking over the last several years — *though they plan to offer a bonus in the future as this has been a hard-to-fill position*
- Leveraging strong relationships with community partners to fund an SRO and career counselor position

BTCS also highlighted the need to track program data and share successes as a core component of their sustainability strategy. Results from the first year were strong, and BTCS is sharing their story with the local Rotary Club, county commission, and other business and community partners. Specifically, for the 15 seniors in the pilot cohort, they dramatically increased their credit attainment rate — students earned more credits in their first semester at Viking Academy than they did for the entirety of the previous school year in a traditional high school. Additionally, 100 percent of students received a high school diploma, with 13 graduating on time and two finishing up their diploma with coursework over the summer. The district believes that tracking and sharing



this kind of data will foster ongoing support for the program beyond the one-time funds from the grant.

Learn More

To learn more, visit the [Viking Academy](#) website or contact [Kelly Vance](#), Tennessee high school assistant principal and Viking Academy administrator.

