For many schools, the silver lining of the pandemic looked a lot like a fresh start: a chance to step back, reevaluate conventional practices, and reinvent learning techniques to make them more effective and meaningful in our disrupted world.

For Portal Schools, an emerging network of independent high schools in Los Angeles, that fresh start is not just a silver lining—it’s the fabric of their philosophy and the foundation of their mission.

“We believe in creating radically relevant education,” said Kate Parsons, Portal Schools Chief Operating Officer. “That means rethinking everything about how school is typically done and developing a model that serves a future workforce that looks very different than it did in the past.”

The concept: at Portal Schools, students simultaneously attain a high school and college degree by attending classes on a campus shared with leading corporations in thriving industries. These industry partnerships give students the opportunity to engage in real-world internships and on-site mentorships. Each Portal School has no more than 60 students and serves an intentionally diverse population, allowing students to develop their passions and purpose through personalized learning pathways.

“Our competency-based education model means that every school day is meaningfully broken down, so there are not as many wasted minutes or classes,” said Parsons. “Students move at their own pace based on mastery, not a set schedule. It’s a very student-centered experience.”

This creates unique opportunities for Portal School graduates, who connect their work in the classroom to tangible career paths, empowering students to “find their voice, blaze their own trail, and thrive as engaged citizens.”

It’s an approach that stems from the collective experience of Portal Schools’ founding members, who, recognizing the often insurmountable barriers many students face to complete their education, began questioning the effectiveness of traditional high school and secondary education systems for all students.

“When our founding team dug into the data, which included major policy challenges such as increasing student debt and lack of preparation for emerging professions, they wanted to rethink the entire model,” said Parsons.

That’s when they developed the school’s expansive goal: to disrupt the current traditional school model and provide essential elements for lifelong success. This means including practical career preparation, soft skills, and exposure to various professional roles as part of the curriculum—skills not typically accessible to high-school-aged students, especially those in underserved communities.

“We know that students typically hit friction when transitioning from high school to college, and from college to career,” Parsons said. “By combining high school and college, our goal is to combat low college completion rates by setting a clear path to employment.”
Valerie Green, Portal Schools Director of Community Outreach and Recruitment, said that student interest will help direct future industry partnerships as the network of schools expands.

“Each Portal School will be embedded in corporations in growing industries, such as design, entertainment, social media, and technology,” said Green. “These partnerships will be driven by where students would like to intern, as well as which industry partners have space and priorities that align with our mission.”

The first Portal School campus, housed at Belkin International, is set to open this fall. The school’s success depends on cultivating a strong student and family community, so strategic and thoughtful recruitment is key.

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This past year has been like no other, and we are all reimagining recruitment and enrollment,” said Green, who is focusing her recruitment efforts on finding students who crave more relevance between school and the real world, those who may need more personalized support, or those wishing to accelerate quickly.

“One key tool in our outreach efforts has been EMA’s Student Prospect Lists, which directly led to enrolling three students—a significant 10 percent of our total enrollment thus far,” said Green.

Grassroots networking also played an important role. Green reached out to feeder schools, as well as directly to teachers and principals, to find applicable students. She connected with parent and business networks, HR departments, and community clubs, and even handed out postcards and put up lawn signs.

“We really left no stone unturned,” said Green. “We’re learning a lot this year so that we can be extremely targeted with our efforts in the future.” Next year, Green plans to adopt EMA’s Standard Application Online to streamline the application process. “I believe it was a missed opportunity this year,” she said.

Although the school, like all others, faced challenges and restrictions because of the pandemic, positive practices emerged. Green said that conducting individual interviews with every family and student was a “game changer” for both the school and families because it fostered a deeper understanding of each other. Parsons noted that a year of remote learning prepared students for Portal Schools’ hybrid schedule, which offers both in-person and virtual classes, providing flexibility in when, where, and how students learn.

“This inaugural enrollment process required a lot of faith from our families—but it also built their trust in us,” said Green. “We’ve been very honest and upfront with our development updates as we work to complete our campus, and families appreciated our openness and authenticity.”

“Our end goal is for every student to graduate with a high school diploma, college degree, and work experience. How each student gets there must be thoughtfully customized, and we have to hold ourselves accountable to ensure we’re serving every student well.”

If the Portal Schools model proves successful, the plan is to extend the network beyond the Los Angeles area. “Our end goal is for every student to graduate with a high school diploma, college degree, and work experience,” said Parsons. “How each student gets there must be thoughtfully customized, and we have to hold ourselves accountable to ensure we’re serving every student well.”

“Our Board of Directors has always emphasized that the Portal Schools concept goes beyond education,” Parsons continued. “Our work is to help our students find the intersection of their strengths and passions so that they can lead a happy and successful life, regardless of their backgrounds.”

As Portal Schools gears up for its first school year, both Parsons and Green are excited to see all of the students they’ve gotten to know so well unite on campus. “We have such uniquely wonderful families, and there’s so much excitement and genuine care going into the model,” Parsons said. “I can’t wait to see it all come together.”

Learn more about Portal Schools at: www.portalschools.org

THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS FOR SHARING THEIR INSIGHTS WITH US:

Valerie Green is the Director of Outreach and External Affairs at Portal Schools. Overseeing recruitment and admissions, Val supports families and students as they explore Portal’s unique model. Val has served K-12 schools and education organizations as a teacher, recruiter, and project manager.

Kate Parsons serves as the Chief Operating Officer on the founding Portal Schools team. Her work is focused on school design, instructional models, and other operational responsibilities. A majority of her experience is in project-based educational settings; most recently she was a Principal at the Da Vinci Schools in Los Angeles.

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