

SPRING 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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**Real World Learning:
Civic Engagement for Students
from the Bronx and Philadelphia**



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Real World Learning: Civic Engagement for Students from the Bronx and Philadelphia

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“I really like it here. I feel like I belong at a place like this!” twelfth grader Rasaun Hill told me on a beautiful October day on the campus of Temple university in Philadelphia.



I have known Rasaun for the past four years as his Principal at Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School (FLHFHS) in The Bronx, New York. So why were Rasaun and I on the campus of a University 2-and-a-half hours away from our school? Well, the easiest answer is: BPL Votes.

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School is one of 275 schools that are part of the [Big Picture Learning](#) (BPL) global network. BPL schools focus on going beyond the school campus to learn by bringing community into the classroom. Forty students and four staff members from [Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School](#) (FLHFHS) made the early morning trip down to Philadelphia to meet up with students from [Vaux High School](#) and [El Centro de Estudiantes](#), two of our sister schools from Big Picture Philadelphia. Together we were part of the initial group of schools participating in BPL Votes, an initiative created by Fannie Lou Hamer alumni Naseem Haamid. Naseem, a civically active student since his freshman year in high school and now in his last year of law school, who created BPL Votes to engage, educate and empower the Big Picture Learning Network in the electoral process.

Naseem conceived this idea last summer through conversations with Joshua Poyer of Big Picture Learning and members of the Fannie Lou team, discussing how we could involve students in civic education during the 2024 presidential election. There we were on October 8th, just under a month from election day, with eighty students canvassing Philadelphia reminding citizens of their voting rights, registering them to vote and making sure they were prepared to follow through and vote on election day. It was one of the most powerful moments in my close to thirty years in education.

In late August, I had received an email from Naseem expressing how much he wanted to engage students in the electoral process of the quickly-approaching election. Going to a school named after arguably one of the greatest civil rights leaders in our history, our students are well-versed in the work of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer registering African-Americans in the south to vote. Since we also use classwork, extracurricular activities and internships to focus on community organizing and civic engagement, Naseem's passion fit nicely into our mission. His pitch was to connect FLHFHS with another school in the network, preferably from Big Picture Philadelphia because of the importance of Pennsylvania in the upcoming election. We knew from the outset that the project had to be non-partisan with the focus of increasing voter turnout, especially among young voters. We enlisted two of our internship teachers, Aaron Broudo and Juvanee Bedminister, who were immediately on board. Now we needed partners in Philadelphia to see if we could make Naseem's dream a reality.



I emailed fellow education leaders in Philadelphia, Tia Hall, Shavonne McMillian and Dawn Johnson in early September to set up a visit. Not only were they supportive and ready to host us, they were already in touch with Naseem for BPL Votes in Philly. He certainly doesn't wait around for things to happen! We set up a call for all of us with Joshua Poyer, the youth advocate for Big Picture Learning, to discuss how the collaboration could happen in the city of brotherly love. After our first call to explore the possibilities, the next step was to get students involved in the planning process. After all, this movement was for them to learn about civic engagement and prepare them to be the future leaders of their communities.

We set up a Zoom meeting with students from Fannie Lou and Big Picture Philadelphia, and they hit it off right away. Though they were from different states, they could identify similar issues facing young people and they were clear that they wanted to be part of the solution. Miranda from Fannie Lou and Mattias from Big Picture Learning Philly took the lead on student planning. Although they had very different experiences with civic education, this quickly became a passion project for both of them. September brought more planning meetings, with students creating icebreakers and activities for eighty students from three different schools. Fannie Lou students decided to provide a lesson on the legend of Fannie Lou Hamer so everyone understood that to do the work that they were embarking on, they were standing on the shoulders of giants. Behind the scenes, Dawn Johnson coordinated an amazing plan for us in Philly, selecting mentors from voting rights internship sites, local business leaders and politicians to sit on a panel in front of our students and discuss critical local issues, share pointers on how to canvas for voting, and discuss the importance of civic responsibility. Dawn also helped secure a place for us to meet, arranged the sites where student groups would go to canvas, and handled the logistics necessary for successful collaboration.

On the morning of October 8th, two days after what would have been her 107th Birthday, the students and staff of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School boarded a bus at 6:30 a.m. in order to participate in a full day of civic activities. Their excitement was evident as we drove down the New Jersey turnpike and they wondered what the Big Picture Philly students would be like, and how they would talk to strangers about their civic duty in order to get them to register to vote.



The bus dropped us off in the parking lot of a local supermarket owned by a young Philadelphia businessman who was serving as one of our panel speakers, and our students made their way over to the Philadelphia Housing Authority where we would spend the morning meeting our new friends and learning how to engage people in the voting process. After we entered the building, we intentionally intermingled students from the three schools so they could get to know one another. At first there was awkwardness, but students overcame it as they found their common purpose for coming together.

We also came bearing gifts, handing Big Picture Philly students shirts with an image of Fannie Lou Hamer on the front and the slogan "We are Fannie Lou" on the back. It's a shirt all of our students and staff receive to honor our namesake. We shared the importance of Mrs. Hamer to the Big Picture Philly students and the seriousness of the work on which we were about to embark filled the room. The panel further emphasized the importance of civic engagement, celebrating our students for being present and ready to make an impact. The students were trained on how to ask people if they are registered, how to fill out voting registration applications, and how to talk to people about the importance of voting for issues that mattered to them. This was the same training that adult voting registration guides receive. The panel and the volunteers elevated this experience for our students because it wasn't just their teachers telling them about the seriousness of what they were about to do. This is the same work that proactive adults actually undertake as engaged citizens. FLHFHS senior Wilbely Nunez discussed the impact of the panel of adults on her experience:

“I found inspiration in the panelists who spoke about their career paths and community contributions, reinforcing the belief that passion and determination can drive meaningful change. Their insights motivated me and underscored the impact we can all have in advocating for important causes, reminding us that collective efforts can lead to lasting differences”

We split into five heterogeneous groups and Dawn provided instructions on canvassing locations. Students walked out of the Philadelphia Housing Authority with a sense of purpose, headed to local community centers, shopping centers and the campus of Temple University. Our guide from Big Picture Philly, Vaux High School Student Government President and senior Rahmeen Fleet, took us through the streets of Philadelphia showing us interesting landmarks, waving hello to neighbors and moving us along. It was a beautiful early fall day; the sun was out and the early semester hustle and bustle of the university campus added to the students' excitement. It was an organization fair day at Temple, so the quad was lined with tables, organization signs and giveaways.

Dawn arranged for BPL Votes to have its own table, so our students sat down with their voter sign-up sheets and voter registration information, seeing that other college organizations were also doing voting registration drives. This gave our team some confidence, coming out from behind the assigned table and approaching Temple students, staff and random strangers to ask if they were registered. The Big Picture Learning students quickly found out that most people on the college campus were registered, but this wasn't a deterrent. It actually gave the students more confidence in what they were trying to accomplish. They were witnessing young people that looked like them that were registered to vote and who cared about many of the same issues that they cared about.



As the number of registrations started to rise, so did our ownership of the process and our confidence. BPL students started going to other organization's tables to find out what was offered at Temple. They spoke with faculty and student leadership and a day of voter registration efforts also became a college visit. Before we knew it, our time was up and we were heading back to the Philadelphia Housing Authority to meet with the other canvassing groups. As we arrived, the energy filled the room and teenagers that were total strangers hours before were sharing social media handles and posting about their experience together.



As they debriefed, I wasn't really fully prepared for what I heard from our young people. We counted out the number of voter registrations that were done by our five groups and the total was twenty-six new registered voters. It might not have seemed like a lot, but our professional voter registration workers shared that twenty-six new voters in a couple of hours was a great accomplishment. We also heard about how the students got to know each other and became fast friends. One group told us they didn't register a single person, but they had many wonderful conversations with local Philadelphia residents and learned about important local issues, and they were told by elders in the community how impressed and proud they were of the work they were doing. FLHFHS senior Symphony Williams reflected on her interactions while canvassing:

“One thing that stood out for me was when I was out encouraging people to vote this one lady was so excited and proud of our movement that she had asked us for a picture and she even encouraged us to continue spreading this positivity and message. This made me feel like I was doing something great for the community even though it's not my own.”



Seeing young people concerned about voting and civic engagement elevated the narrative about young people, and the community members wanted the Big Picture students to know that. As we debriefed, we celebrated our victories, acknowledged individuals in our groups, and left with a new sense of purpose and pride. Traveling north back up the New Jersey turnpike, the students of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School felt proud that they represented their namesake well. They knew what they accomplished on that day wasn't the end of the work, that no issues were resolved; but they understood that their voices mattered and that they *could* make a difference. Our students felt empowered by this experience, understanding that they can make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others, influencing the course of events in the society in which they live. This was demonstrated in FLHFHS senior Omayra Del Rosario's reflection:

"I feel that with our school being named after Fannie Lou Hamer, the woman who made voting possible among black people, this trip was necessary and really allowed us as students to reflect on how fortunate and important voting is and how we need to get our community more involved. When I'm 18, I plan on voting in every election as I want my voice to be heard, every vote counts."



FLHFHS senior Isabella Haddock shared this feeling of accomplishment:

"The experience of actually going canvassing was really cool. I was nervous at first. People did tell me no, and people were rude to me at times. But that didn't really stop me from going up to people and asking them if they were registered to vote. People told me that what I was doing was good and it made me feel a little bit more comfortable and courageous to go through what I was tasked. I loved the group members I was with; they had amazing vibes and it felt like we clicked well, and our personalities meshed well together. We ended up having the most registers, with 8 total. Not to brag but I think we did pretty well"

The work didn't end in Philadelphia. Many of the students from both cities keep in touch. One student has even gone back down to Philly to visit her new friends since we've returned home. Students are also continuing their voter registration efforts back here in the Bronx. Fannie Lou Hamer junior Miranda Acosta has conducted voter registration sessions in the cafeteria for students age eighteen and older, energizing classmates around voting, voter rights and other youth issues. In hindsight, Miranda reflected:

"The idea came up that some students from Fannie Lou should go to Philly and try to convince people to vote with students from Big Picture Schools in Philadelphia. Aaron handed all the responsibilities to me. At first I really didn't think I could handle it, but I did it. It was such an amazing experience and accomplishment of mine. It's definitely something I will never forget."

Despite the fact that BPL Votes is non-partisan, many of our students were clear about who they wanted to win the election for the Presidency of the United States. I fully expected them to be discouraged after election day, worrying that the time and effort they put into voting registration didn't reflect in the election result. But I am very proud to say that I was wrong. The students have expressed their commitment to continue this work with their new friends from Philadelphia. They have continued to videoconference to discuss important issues, share information about upcoming local elections, and strategize about how to implement what they have learned.



In February 2025, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School hosted a guided experience for visitors from across the country, including a co-panel of students from FLHFHS and Philadelphia Big Picture to discuss what they learned about collaboration, civic engagement and incorporating the community into their classroom learning. The work continues and has the potential to grow in scope and impact. Big Picture Philadelphia and Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School students want school leaders from across the country to know that BPL Votes was not an isolated experience. They encouraged school leaders to put students in the center of the curriculum and give them influence and impact on issues that affect them in the real world.

There were many powerful lessons I learned from this experience that I hope to continue in our practice FLHFHS:

We can benefit from utilizing our alumni network

BPL Votes was Naseem's idea, but he was comfortable connecting us to his network. How do we continue to open doors to alumni to share their expertise, give back and create new opportunities for current students?

Students respond to meaningful work that is important to their lives.

Registering people to vote wasn't just a task for many of the students, it was a mission. They identified issues they wanted changed and knew voting was the way to make it happen.

Community involvement provides real world learning

Student learning and engagement was enhanced by its connection to the community. Big Picture Philly students demonstrated their knowledge and connection to the community and the community, in kind, responded. Our students recognized that and they are doing the same for their community here in the Bronx.

Collaboration with other students, schools and organizations expands our capacity

One of the powerful things about this experience was the collaboration of young people and staff among the schools. It was important that local community-based organizations, nonprofits and businesses got involved and supported the work. Students were given ownership to collaborate with other students around critical and issues.

Students need to be at the center of their own learning

Students planned much of the event and the work that has continued. Give them tasks that are meaningful and important and they will respond. When they went out to canvas for voting, our students took the lead.

I am proud to have been part of this work and I am looking forward to what our students do with their new learning, new friendships, and newfound mission.



References




Big Picture Learning

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, Bronx, New York

El Centro de Estudiantes, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Vaux Big Picture High School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Jeffrey Palladino is the proud principal of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in the Bronx, New York. He has served the students of New York City for the past 25 years and has been the Principal of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School since 2014. In 2016, he was invited to speak at the White House by the Barack Obama administration for the Reach Higher forum on higher education.   



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