Brightworks

Brightworks, an experience-driven learning community founded in 2011, operates one K–12 microschool in San Francisco. Brightworks students learn through the design and implementation of various projects, an approach that encourages collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking in students.

Brightworks opened its first location in 2011 and has not yet announced any plans to add additional campuses.

The Program

At Brightworks, the school year is broken up into three trimesters. The first one is short (six weeks), and the second two are longer to make up the rest of the year. The school picks a theme for the year, and students learn about educational subjects in a process called “The Arc.” For each trimester, teachers and administrators create mini-themes based on this overarching theme. With three major “arcs” each year, students move through a diverse course of study in a series of intensive immersions, emphasizing depth over breadth and integrating and contextualizing the development of skills and domain knowledge. Each arc has a unique theme and consists of three stages:

- **Exploration:** Students delve into fundamental questions about a topic. This is typically achieved through work with related experts, field research, and structured games.
- **Expression:** Students complete a project (art, research, etc., depending on the subject).
- **Exposition:** Students share their work with the school community through written and oral presentations.

Every child from kindergarten through 12th grade begins a typical day with an all-school morning circle where there are announcements.

HIGHLIGHTS

- School uses a project-intensive learning process called “The Arc.”
- Students work with community experts to learn about subject matter.
- Students develop written and oral presentations to teach parents about their work.
- No homework or standardized testing

**TUITION 2016-2017:**

$27,900

As compared to...

Median independent school tuition in San Francisco

Grades K-5: $29,500

Grades 6-8: $30,040

Grades 9-12: $42,656
about things going on after school or at club time, and kids share a piece of curriculum that they’ve learned. Then, students go to their classrooms, which are called “band” spaces. Students work on projects in bands, a group of seven to ten students with, at most, a three-year age span among them, guided by a collaborator (teacher). There are no periods in the day; everything is integrated. During the morning, activities focus on skills development, such as math lessons or some hands-on math activity. The scope and sequence of the topic students learn are related to something they’ll be doing later or to an individual project.

The project-oriented focus of the arc allows students to learn about subjects in ways that are more engaging for them than traditional lectures, while the theme contextualizes their projects and connects them to the Brightworks community.

Students follow their own learning paths. Students have created hot-air balloons to learn about the weather, written short stories to learn about plot, and built a pulley system to learn about ancient architecture. Projects are designed to teach children about traditional subjects such as English or mathematics, while allowing them to develop applicable skills in areas such as technology or communication. Most important, projects teach students how to learn and ask questions, how to fail, and how to iterate to achieve a successful end product.

**The Business Model**

The student-teacher ratio at Brightworks is 8:1. Brightworks currently enrolls 80 students from kindergarten to 10th grade, and, in two more years, the school hopes to be fully enrolled up to 12th grade with about 100 students. The school operates with 16 staff members: ten collaborators, three assistant collaborators, and three support staff who help run the school’s other programs, such as the shop. Brightworks places heavy emphasis on professional development for staff members, shutting down the school for a professional development week every February and reserving two weeks before the school year for a deep dive into pedagogy. Brightworks believes that talented teachers are attracted to the school because of its unique learning model and because of the trust placed in the school by its community. The school community trusts teachers to take risks and make mistakes and maintain a large degree of autonomy and flexibility in their work.

Brightworks operates as a non-profit organization, and is funded through tuition, direct fund-raising, and the occasional grant. The school keeps expenses to a minimum, with most money going toward salaries, benefits, and school programming. More than a third of students are on tuition assistance, which is the primary focus of the school’s fund-raising efforts.

Brightworks does not have any plans to open new locations in the future, but it has partnerships and advising relationships with a local charter school in San Francisco that
uses the arc model and with someone in Los Angeles who wants to start a K-8 school inspired by Brightworks.

The school plans to launch a summer Teachers Institute in 2017 to familiarize teachers around the country with the Brightworks model. School leaders see Brightworks as the open-source model for a type of education, rather than a chain of schools. By teaching educators and collaborating with entrepreneurs hoping to open Brightworks-inspired schools, Brightworks can spread its pedagogical model without having to open more physical locations.

“Brightworks kids know how to access knowledge. They know how to acknowledge what they don’t know. They know how to ask the right questions [and] to get at the answer. They know honestly how to fail. A Brightworks kid would never have a finished product of anything on the first try. They’re constantly iterating. It’s part of the model.” – Liz Jaroslow, Head of School, Brightworks

Lessons Learned – Takeaways for Your School

- A project-based approach allows students to learn both academic and practical skills in a more engaging way than a traditional lecture. Teachers at Brightworks involve children in the direction of all projects and pursuits to provide an immersive and personalized education for each child. They strike a careful balance between cultivating freedom and agency in students to pursue their own passions and well-crafted lessons to ignite new approaches, skills, and perceptions. What opportunities do you offer your students and teachers to engage in a similar student-led dynamic?

- By sharing each project with the school community, Brightworks students develop their presentation and public speaking skills, while also keeping parents informed about their academic progress.
Noteworthy

• Brightworks has an all-school circle twice a day. Morning circle is a longer gathering where all sing, play games, talk about the arc topic, and make discoveries. The day ends with a brief coming together and review of each band’s day before everyone heads to their afternoon activities.

Students and staff spend Friday exploring and working on one of several open activities in the different spaces of the school: Art Studio, Cork Floor (a multipurpose space for exercise and theater arts), Science Lab, Workshop, etc. Collaborators curate materials and experiences that are designed to pique curiosity free of the arc topic, and students play a greater role in decision making and space explorations, going where their interests lead them.

Sources


Brightworks website; online at http://www.sfbrightworks.org/.

Interview with Liz Jaroslow, Head of School, Brightworks, February 19th, 2017.