

BMore Me: A Case Study

At A Glance

In 2019, Baltimore City Public Schools piloted an ambitious new social studies curriculum, [BMore Me](#). Developed for grades 6-11, the curriculum is grounded in the idea that leaning into young people's sense of who they are and where they are from is key to their growth—within the classroom and beyond. Core tenets of this pioneering student-centered curriculum are:

- **Believe in young people as change agents in their own lives.** Research shows that Black and Latinx youth and young people from households with lower income perceive their identities to be assets, not liabilities. BMore Me centers that conviction and ties it to rigorous academic material ([learn more here](#)).
- **Expose young people to potential careers and possible futures.** Offer more “windows and mirrors”—activities and guest speakers including entrepreneurs, activists, artists, and other local luminaries ([learn more here](#)).
- **Create opportunities for young people to discover or explore their interests and expand their social networks.** Offer mentorship and after-school field trips to ignite previously unimagined pathways ([learn more here](#)).
- **Empower young people to make choices and decisions.** Stimulate engagement with classroom material by having students choose and shape the content—as well as how they're being taught ([learn more here](#)).
- **Elevate student voices in shaping their learning experience.** BMore Me piloted an innovative assessment tool to help teachers better understand how students were experiencing and engaging with the curriculum—by asking students themselves ([learn more here](#)).
- **Grow young people's “soft skills.”** Invest in communication, critical thinking, and creativity—the in-demand career skills now and into the future ([learn more here](#)).
- **Create spaces outside the classroom for young people to shine.** Encourage students' ingenuity and spotlight their own projects by creating platforms where they can flex their talents outside traditional academic contexts ([learn more here](#)).

Taking Ideas To Scale

BMore Me Year Two: A Yearlong Curriculum

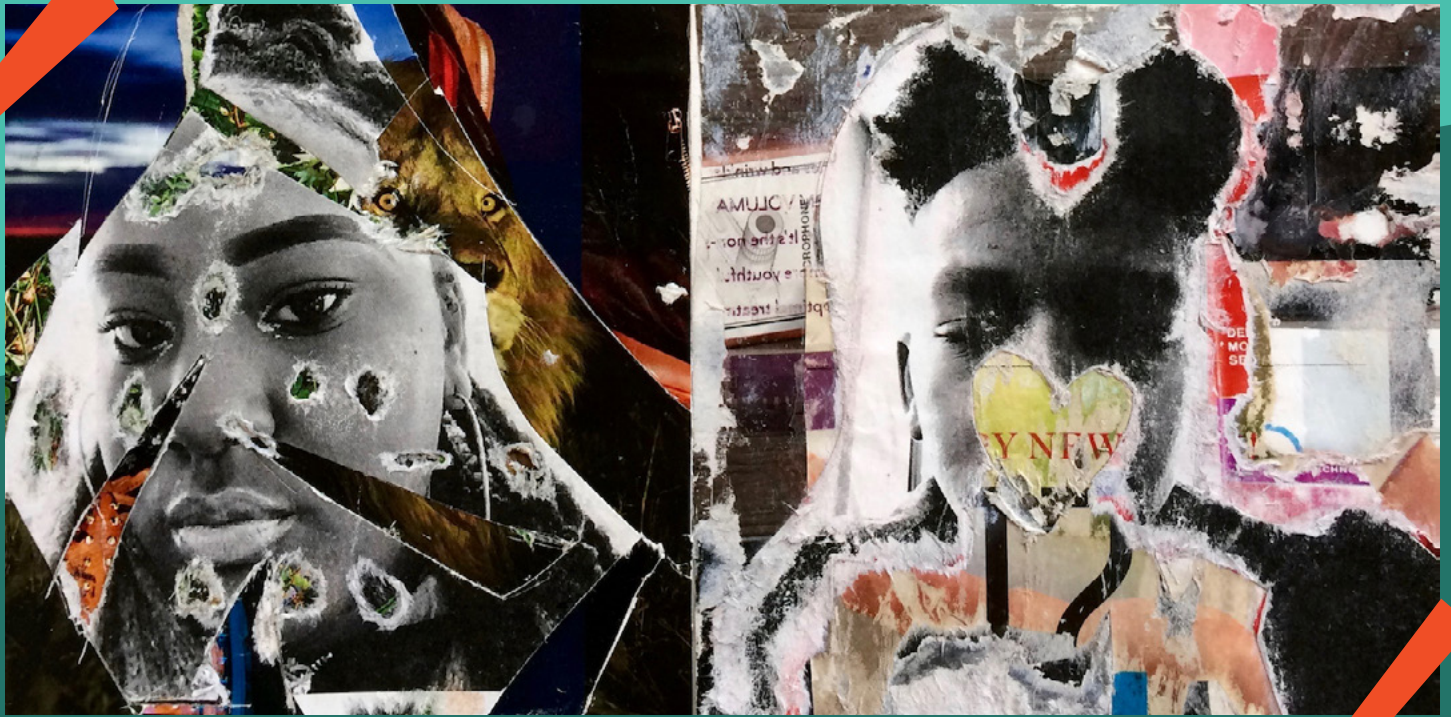
Fueled by the positive response that BMore Me has received from both teachers and students, Baltimore City Public Schools is working to expand the curriculum from three weeks to the entire academic year, starting with the unit for eighth graders. Students will play an even greater role in this expanded initiative which will:

- **Integrate real-time feedback from students.** Teachers will teach a beta version of each unit and solicit feedback from students in real-time for fine-tuning.
- **Enlist youth as curriculum ambassadors.** Amplify leadership roles for students to share and shape BMore Me and keep the curriculum tuned to student priorities.
- **Involve students in shaping educational practices district-wide.** Student leaders will work to evolve BMore Me at the district level and, beyond that, team up with teachers on strategies to improve the distance learning experience.

Lessons Learned

Key lessons from Baltimore City Public Schools' experience launching BMore Me:

- 1. Make equity the foundation for everything.**
Establishing race and class equity as a prime directive helps focus and ground decision-making.
- 2. Ask the community and parents what matters.**
Their values and concerns can help shape a culturally responsive curriculum that is relevant to young people's broader lives and future.
- 3. Enlist students on the ground floor—and keep them engaged.**
Integrating students early on in the development and roll-out of a new curriculum improves the teaching—and learning—experience.
- 4. Develop a curriculum that spans the entire academic year—and commit to real-time continuous improvement.**
Doing so gives you more runway to adjust and fine-tune elements of the unit before and during its implementation in the classroom to enhance student learning.
- 5. Dedicate a program lead from the start.**
A new curriculum, especially one as multifaceted as BMore Me, is a big lift; an experienced and passionate leader overseeing the effort is crucial.
- 6. Leverage the experience of teachers.**
Curriculum matters but so does empowering teachers to teach it. This means tapping their expertise at all phases of development, testing, and implementation.



"Collaborative Art Piece" by Charlene Morris, and Roosevelt Ferrell, Grade 11
CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth, charmilitmag.org

Introduction

In 2019, Baltimore City Public Schools piloted an ambitious new social studies curriculum, BMore Me. Developed for grades 6-11, the curriculum is grounded in the idea that leaning into young people's sense of who they are and where they're from is key to their growth—within the classroom and beyond.

This case study, developed in partnership with Equitable Futures Initiative, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, documents the first year of BMore Me through the eyes of the educators and students who lived it. The case study explores the dynamic intersection between BMore Me's novel approach to centering young people's agency in their learning and cutting-edge research that offers fresh insights into how young people—particularly Black and Latinx youth and young people from households with lower income—develop their occupational identity and navigate the pathways to fulfilling their future aspirations.

The Context

When Dr. Sonja Santelises took the helm as CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools in 2016, student achievement levels across the district had stagnated. The district is Maryland's fourth largest school system. Half its 79,000 students are from households with lower income; 76 percent are Black and 13 percent are Latinx. Santelises undertook a thorough review of the district's curriculum to find out what students were studying and whether the material was preparing young people for future success. The review, conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, revealed a patchwork effect across grade levels that resulted in knowledge gaps in human biology, math, and history that Santelises found "heartbreaking."

The Challenge

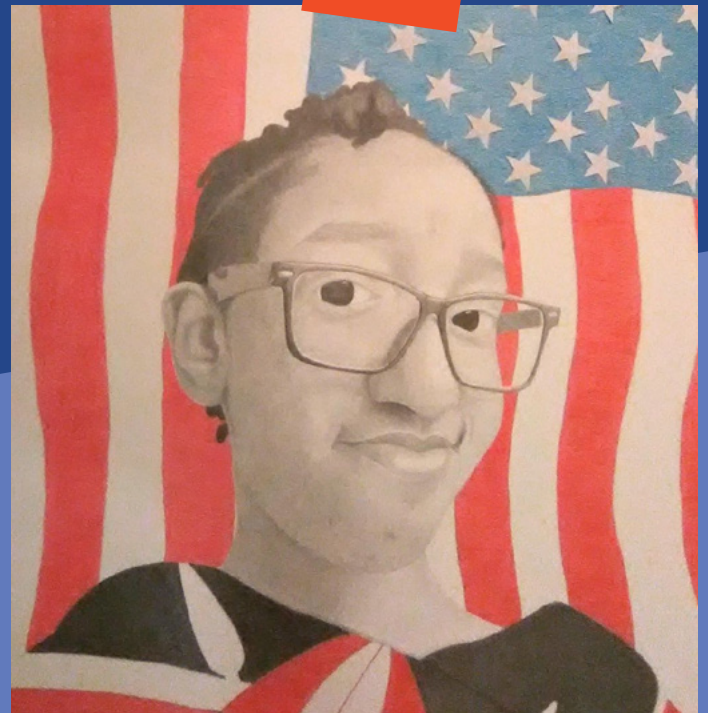
In 2017, Santelises and the Board of Education released its [Blueprint for Success](#), a district-wide plan focused on literacy, student wholeness, and staff leadership—and a promise to overhaul the school system’s curriculum with the understanding that the key to raising student achievement would have to involve raising expectations and the quality of students’ learning experience across the board. [BMore Me](#), a new social studies curriculum, emerged as one of the Blueprint’s signature initiatives.

Written by City Schools teachers and launched in 2019 for middle- and high-schoolers, BMore Me embodies the urging of community leaders to ground young people’s education in a local context and of parents who wanted their children to see themselves reflected in their learning. The three-week curriculum connects Baltimore’s rich history and legacy to students’ identities, and it challenges them to imagine their own role in shaping their future and the future of the city. Each grade’s BMore Me unit is anchored by a probing question. For sixth graders, it’s *Who Deserves a Monument?* For eighth graders, it’s *What is Baltimore’s Narrative?*

While Santelises and her team were focused on strengthening academic rigor and student engagement, they were also highly attuned to equity gaps in a range of other experiences that can profoundly influence young people at a critical time in their lives when they are exploring their passions and future life opportunities. BMore Me is an instructive example of an innovative curriculum that is thinking outside the box to expose students to new experiences that researchers say are essential building blocks for young people as they navigate future career paths: 1) Social Capital, or who you know; 2) Occupational Identity—what students like to do, what they believe they are good at, and where they feel they belong; and 3) Skills—especially in-demand skills that can be translated from the world of the classroom to the world of work.



“Untitled Portrait” by Bryce Gooden, Grade 12
CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth, charmlitmag.org



“Self-portrait” by Khaliah Deya, Grade 12
CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth, charmlitmag.org

BMore Me In Action

Core tenets of the BMore Me curriculum include:

Believe in young people as change agents in their own lives.

Research shows that Black and Latinx youth and young people from households with lower income perceive their identities to be assets, not liabilities. They also believe in their power to forge their own futures. But the dominant narratives they hear about their communities, including negative stereotypes, can undercut these perceptions.

BMore Me was designed to counter these negative frames by offering what Santelises calls “windows and doors”: lessons and activities aimed at connecting students’ own lives and interests to new topics and broader currents within and beyond their home city where they could imagine staking their future selves.

This meant course-correcting the existing curriculum so that the culturally relevant material was not limited to the tragic legacy of slavery and Jim Crow but included the Harlem Renaissance and other vital cultural and social touchstones of Black American history and the nation’s history. It meant teaching students about their own family’s histories and the histories of people and places that have been traditionally overlooked in textbooks—and creating powerful and truthful counter-narratives in which young people can see themselves, and who they want to be, reflected back.

“When we only talk about community pain, we don’t give children anything to be hopeful about,” Santelises said. “I was tired of children of color being forced to make a false choice—and, in this climate, Black children in particular—of having to choose either total ignorance—meaning you don’t get to see anything about yourself—or of always seeing yourself as a victim in such a beaten down state that it offers no hope.” But when students start seeing themselves in more representative stories about their communities and city, “you actually get the kind of stories that our country is in dire need of right now.”

Expose young people to potential careers and possible futures.

One of BMore Me’s core innovations was to break down the walls between the classroom and community with community-based programming like its **Speaker Series**. Supported by social impact advisors NLD Strategic, this quarterly series featured panels with activists, artists, business entrepreneurs, and others who are influencing and shaping Baltimore’s present and future. The goal was to expose students to accomplished Baltimoreans who share aspects of their background and identity. Each event brought together 300 to 400 students from ten-plus schools.

While the series was cut short by the spread of COVID-19, students heard from local luminaries including Chef Jasmin Norton of Urban Oyster, the first female and Black-owned oyster bar in Maryland; Devin Allen, a photographer whose iconic documentation of the Freddie Gray protests won him the cover of *Time* magazine; and Brittany Young, an engineer and social entrepreneur whose nonprofit B-360 connects young people with a passion for urban dirt biking riding—a sport and cultural touchstone with a long history in the city—to STEM. The series was a way to introduce students to Baltimoreans who share aspects of their background and identity and elevate their sense of what’s possible, said Christina Ross, program manager of Baltimore City Public Schools’ Blueprint Initiatives and herself a former social studies teacher.

Create opportunities for young people to discover or explore their interests and expand their social networks.

Black and Latinx young people and young people from households with lower income often do not have access to a broad range of occupational possibilities. Research shows that these experiences, and having social capital, plays an outsized role when it comes to learning about—and landing—meaningful jobs. City Schools, with strategic and implementation support from NLD Strategic, made an effort to build these important elements into the curriculum including the creation of an **After-school Club**. Offered to middle schoolers participating in BMore Me units, the Club created a space outside the classroom that brought together students and adult mentors from the district's central office to expand and deepen young people's interests and passions by exposing them to broader experiences and networks of adults who are invested in their futures.

Part of those networks are other students. One outcome of the Club was that students from schools that rarely interact—like Maree Farring Elementary Middle School in the southernmost part of the city and Barclay Elementary Middle School in the city's center—met each other for the first time. Field trips were planned for club members, including a visit to the Baltimore-based sports apparel company Under Armour. Another trip that would have introduced students to Baltimore City's tourism office had to be put on hold when the pandemic hit. Plans are in the works to restart the Club in the new academic year.

Empower young people to make choices and decisions.

BMore Me's use of culturally responsive content and inquiry-based learning reflect trends in K-12 education. But its focus on centering student agency and decision-making is pioneering.

Students themselves are authorities on whether classroom lessons are breaking through, but too often their interests and perspectives are marginalized, which leads to disengagement. The antidote is to involve students in shaping the content in the classroom as well as how it's being taught. "If students are not up at the center of it, it is not going to be successful—even if it is the best curriculum in the world," said Ross.

For example, in Kristine Sieloff's 11th grade class at Benjamin Franklin High School, students, not the teacher, chose the core topics they wanted to focus on for the BMore Me unit on government.

Most of Sieloff's students are English learners whose families migrated from Central America. They live in Brooklyn-Curtis Bay, an area in Baltimore which ranks among the most polluted zip codes in Maryland and the country. Her students chose environmental justice as a focus topic, which led to a discussion about zoning laws and the historic displacement of residential neighborhoods for industrial use.

They also learned about Destiny Watford, who, as a senior at Ben Franklin High, led a campaign against a proposed trash incinerator within a mile of their school and successfully pressured the school district and other local government agencies and nonprofits to divest from the project. For Sieloff, the students' decision to focus on environmental pollution in their own backyards helped charge her lessons on public policy with relevance and urgency.

Sieloff not only taught BMore Me at the high school level, she also had a hand in writing the curriculum for the seventh grade unit, an experience she described as “empowering and liberating.” The curriculum adheres to academic standards, she said, but BMore Me also invites teachers to ask, “What would make [the lesson] more real and applicable to the students’ lives?” For students, the curriculum is a springboard to “develop their fluency and to be able to express their beliefs about something and back it up in an argument confidently.”

Elevate student voices in shaping their learning experience.

As BMore Me was being rolled out across Baltimore’s public schools system, a smaller pilot was underway to help teachers create more engaging and equitable learning experiences by elevating student voice through an innovative feedback process.

Erica Robbins was one of seven social studies teachers in the pilot who tested this new student engagement tool. Developed in partnership with the Project for Education Research That Scales (PERTS) and university researchers, the tool, which surveyed students directly, helped identify and refine three core metrics central to student engagement: 1) meaningful work, 2) teacher caring, and 3) feedback for growth.

At the end of each class, Robbins and her colleagues had their students fill out an “exit ticket,” which gauges how effectively students believe the lessons they learned that day connected to a self-generated list of their own values and interests that they created at the top of the school year. The students also rate their own learning experience on a scale of 1 to 10 against the conditions being measured (“This week, I learned skills that will help me succeed later in life” and “I feel like my teachers care what I think.”).

Robbins, who teaches seventh grade at North Bend Elementary/Middle School where 75 percent of the students are African American and half are from households with lower income, said the tickets were initially met with some skepticism. But her students soon came to look forward to the surveys once they perceived the active role they were playing in shaping their own learning. If she forgot or was late in distributing the surveys, they were quick and vocal about reminding her.

Robbins said the immediacy of the feedback from her students enabled her to adjust quickly when certain lesson plans weren’t resonating as well as others. The BMore Me unit and the testing instrument “challenged me as a teacher,” Robbins said. “[BMore Me] also helped the students know that what they’re learning matters and that their interests matter. It was like they were investing in themselves because they were learning about what it means to live in their city.”

Grow young people’s “soft skills.”

Studies show that the skills that will matter most now and into the future are “soft skills” like communication, critical thinking, and creativity, which can’t be automated. Building these skills is strongly embedded in BMore Me.

For LaShay Wingate, a student in Robbins's class, the BMore Me unit, *What Makes Us Baltimore*, was an eye-opener. She was especially keen on the lesson that examined Baltimore's Native American history—in particular a period in the 1930s when a sizable population of the Lumbee Tribe migrated from North Carolina and settled in East Baltimore, seeking jobs and a better quality of life. Later when Wingate was assigned to interview family members about how they came to call Baltimore home, she learned that her grandmother, a nurse, was not originally from Baltimore but moved here as a girl with her great-grandmother and siblings from North Carolina. Her grandmother also told her that she believes there is Native American blood in their lineage.

These investigations into Baltimore's history and her own family's background encouraged Wingate, who has ambitions to be a forensics specialist, to reassess her native city and her role in it.

"A lot of people say, 'Oh, Baltimore isn't as cool as other states like California,'" Wingate said. "I liked learning about Baltimore's past and realizing that it does have stuff and all these things happened here. It made me want to still live in Baltimore because there's a lot more to look into."

"When you can situate your story within a larger narrative, it has an empowering impact. When you yourself are verified, you are in a much better position to then want to learn about other people," said Santelises.

Before the end of the school year, Santelises met with a group of students who organized a local protest, part of a wave of civil unrest following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Among the students' demands: more equitable resources and more Black history and literature in Baltimore's schools. Santelises said her "heart leaped" when the students presented her with a list of books that they insisted no Baltimore student should graduate without having read. It did not surprise her to learn that the students on the frontline of the protest also attend the city's highest-achieving high schools. She sees BMore Me as integral to the district's broader mandate to deliver high-quality public education that is standards-aligned and inspires students to think for themselves.

"I want young people who are protesting to also be able to read and write position papers," said Santelises. When you know you can walk into multiple rooms, when you can record and defend your point and your viewpoint in a variety of ways, there is a different feel about how you show up. It is a different conversation across the table."

Create spaces outside the classroom for young people to shine.

Before COVID-19 struck, a **BMore Me Student Showcase** for students to share their own creative work—from spoken word to dance performance—was in the works. While the pandemic led to the showcase being canceled, the district remains committed to hosting youth-driven platforms that spotlight students' own self-expression. In the new academic year, BMore Me will continue to coordinate with Rashad Staton, the youth engagement specialist with the district's Office of Family and Community Engagement, to stage "pop up" events at different schools or host them online depending on safety requirements once schools are back in session.

Taking Ideas To Scale

BMore Me Year Two: A Yearlong Curriculum

Fueled by the positive response that BMore Me has received from teachers and students alike, Baltimore City Public Schools is expanding the curriculum from three weeks to the entire academic year, starting with the unit for eighth graders. Students will play an even greater role in the expanded six-unit curriculum, which will be written by a core team of teacher-fellows. Core elements include:



Integrate real-time feedback from students. Each new unit will be road-tested in classrooms in real time. A selected group of teachers will gather feedback from their eighth graders using surveys and interviews that will gauge what's resonating and working and what's not. The units will then be modified in response to the feedback and inform the units that follow. In these ways students will not only be consumers of their education but instrumental in its design.



Enlist youth as student engagement ambassadors. Ross and her team are coordinating with the Office of Family and Community Engagement's Youth Ambassador Program to cultivate student ambassadors. These students, representing 12 middle and high schools across the district, will each receive a stipend and be trained in equity and continuous improvement adapted from the same training models adult educators receive. Student ambassadors will conduct interviews with their peers on their school experience, review the survey data, and generate recommendations for improving student engagement in classrooms and schools. They will also act as liaisons between their peers and district leaders.



Involve students in shaping educational practices district-wide. The CEO's Youth Leadership Advisory Council, also composed of students, will analyze learnings from the ambassadors' representative schools to recommend student-centered learning and continuous improvement strategies that can be scaled district-wide.

According to Ross, students will also play a critical active role in improving the experience of remote learning for students in the new academic year as Baltimore—along with districts throughout the country—brace for the likelihood that the ongoing pandemic will mean the extension of distance learning in some form. To prepare, the district has developed a week-long summer design camp for 11 teachers and 22 of their students who are tasked with designing a toolkit of strategies for teachers district-wide to strengthen the virtual classroom experience. Not limited to BMore Me, the strategies will help build and maintain connection among teachers and students as well as community partners. Students participating in the design camp will double as end users and investigators in this process.

Lessons Learned

“How we do the work matters.” This is Santelises’s ethic and one that has paved the road for BMore Me. Below are key lessons from Baltimore City Public Schools’ experience launching a student-centered, culturally responsive curriculum that can help set students on a trajectory to a successful future.

1.

Make equity the foundation for everything. Early in her tenure as CEO, Santelises and members of City Schools’ Board of Education made a commitment to make race and class equity the cornerstone of all their decision-making moving forward. They created an Equity Office to reinforce this value district-wide. Equity is reinforced through the Blueprint and through all elements of BMore Me, from a Summer Institute for teacher-fellows to trainings for student leaders. A member of the Equity Office’s team is also part of the BMore Me district team.

2.

Ask the community and parents what matters. The district held 11 separate community events with hundreds of parents, educators, and other stakeholders to identify priorities for its 170 schools. This process contributed to the Blueprint for Success and the development of BMore Me as a curriculum that is rooted in the city’s cultural, political, and economic life and encourages students to draw from and broaden their own perspectives to ignite previously unimagined pathways. Additionally, community leaders have helped open doors to professional networks, guest speakers, and field trips for students. As Robbins noted, some of her students have never traveled far from their own neighborhoods; access to these individuals and experiences have enormous power to expand their worldviews.

3.

Enlist students on the ground floor—and keep them engaged. In hindsight, “I wish we had told young people earlier what we were doing and why we were doing it,” Santelises said about the BMore Me roll out. Doing so would have enlisted students’ insights early on, but also their participation in shaping and sharing the intent and purpose of the curriculum. “When you give people background knowledge, you always risk that they are going to say, ‘What you are doing is not enough.’ But I think it is important to engage the end user on whose behalf you are working so they can make an informed demand on their schools.” The district’s approach to year two of BMore Me, which elevates student voice and leadership, is a concerted effort to move in this direction.

4.

Develop a curriculum that spans an entire academic year—and commit to real-time continuous improvement. While a three-week timeframe may have been necessary for BMore Me’s inaugural run, Ross acknowledged that the relatively short runway made it “tricky” to systematically evaluate outcomes and opportunities for continuous improvement. “With a year-long curriculum we can actually look at how it’s working over time and how students are being impacted.”

The BMore Me team is investing heavily in real-time improvement, listening and analyzing unit lessons as they are being taught in the classroom and adjusting the implementation based on what they learn—a nimble and innovative approach to continuous improvement.

In the event that a shorter curriculum is what you have to work with, make sure all participating schools kick off the curriculum at the same time, Ross advised. This will make the curriculum easier to coordinate and monitor, especially if your district is relatively large.

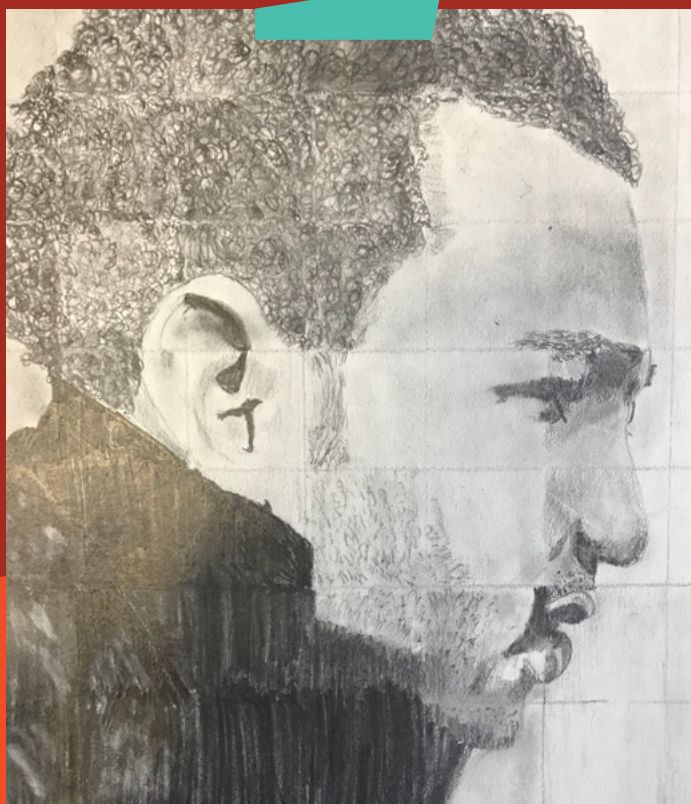
5.

Dedicate a program lead from the start. When launching a multi-dimensional initiative like BMore Me, “do not underestimate the need for someone who can lead it,” Santelises said. Because core elements of the curriculum were new to the district—from community-based programming to the integration of novel student engagement tools—having a leader like Ross at the helm who is a dedicated manager and passionate about the mission was critical, as was recognizing the pull of everyday work on existing staff and being mindful not to overload their plates. BMore Me also benefits from having a district-level youth engagement specialist who oversees all student-led initiatives.

6.

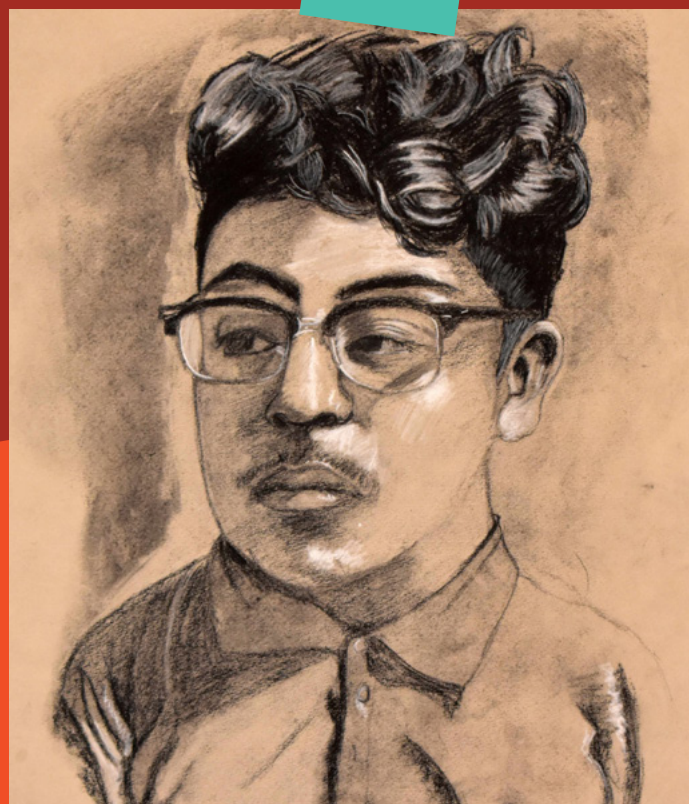
Leverage the experience of teachers. Curriculum matters but so does empowering teachers to teach it well. For Sieloff, who is entering her 18th year as a teacher, BMore Me was the first curriculum she had been invited to write from scratch, and it was an opportunity she relished. As part of the team of writers of the yearlong eighth grade curriculum, Sieloff is already thinking through strategies to improve instruction for English learners in the event that distance learning continues this fall, including methods she’s tested by fire when the pandemic forced schools to shift to distance learning.

For Robbins, BMore Me offered a platform to test her creative mettle in the classroom as well as gave her the opportunity to be part of an early cohort of teachers that is now positioned to advise their peers in novel approaches to inspiring and measuring student engagement. “As with teaching anything, you just have to believe in it,” Robbins said. “Believe in the curriculum and allow your students to teach you who they are.”



“Grid Drawing” by Judith Veale, Grade 7

CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth, charmlitmag.org




“Anthony” by Kalaia Petteway, Grade 12

CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth, charmlitmag.org

The Takeaway

Young people's own mindsets have an enormous influence in how they learn—and how they form their occupational identity, work, and life goals. An asset-based curriculum that invests in students' sense of self can be game-changing, particularly for Black and Latinx youth and young people from households with lower income.

BMore Me reinforces this insight: that young people's conviction that they are change agents in their own lives can be amplified when their education centers their experience. From this foundation, they will be more readily positioned to build the knowledge, skills, and social capital they need to seize opportunities and write their own future narratives.



**Believe in the
curriculum
and allow your
students to teach
you who they are.**

**– ERICA ROBBINS, 7TH GRADE TEACHER, NORTH BEND
ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOL**