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DURABLE SKILLS

Building 21 Philadelphia

Where Competency Replaces Compliance and Every Student's Growth Is Visible

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania · Non-Criteria Public School · ~400 Students



"I learned to be a more open person and speak to other people. Also, I don't feel like as inside."

— Amaya, Senior

School Snapshot

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| Location | West Oak Lane neighborhood, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania |
| Type | Non-criteria public school within the School District of Philadelphia |
| Enrollment | ~400 students, grades 9-12 |
| Admission | No criteria for entry; approximately 68% of students enter 9th grade significantly behind grade level |
| Platform | Beacon Learning, providing real-time competency tracking across four domains and 12 developmental stages |
| Philosophy | All assessment based on demonstrated competency levels across a comprehensive framework; competency growth and mastery translates to grades and credits |

Who They Serve

Building 21 serves a predominantly African American student population from throughout Philadelphia, with a significant concentration from the West Oak Lane community. Students are predominantly economically disadvantaged. Ninth grade class sizes are intentionally smaller with a 15:1 ratio. The school also has a Behavioral Health Department and a School-Based Health Center.

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| Graduation Rates | significantly above district averages |
| College Acceptance and Persistence | above district averages |
| 90%+ | participation in authentic professional internship experiences |
| Strong Correlation | between competency achievement and post-secondary success (higher than traditional metrics like GPA or test scores) |
| Pennsylvania Pathway 5 | graduation option allows evidence-based demonstration of readiness |

What Makes It Distinctive

- **100% competency-based assessment** across four domains (Content Knowledge, Habits of Success, Next Generation Essential Skills, Wayfinding & Personal Development), translated to grades and credits
- **“No penalty for learning” philosophy:** grades are based on the highest performance levels achieved, ensuring students are not penalized for improvement
- **Universal junior internship requirement** with 90%+ participation at sites including Bentley Systems, Fox Chase Cancer Center, immigration law firms, and elementary classrooms
- **Studio-based curriculum:** problem-centered, project-based learning modules replacing traditional course structure
- **Weekly electives** taught by industry professionals, with offerings based on student interest surveys designed as both windows and mirrors
- **Beacon Learning platform** providing real-time competency visibility to students, teachers, advisors, and families

Opening: From Silent Struggle to Strategic Self-Advocacy

“Last year I remember I did not like to ask for help at all. And it sort of affected my grades because of that.” Amaya’s admission reveals a pattern familiar to many students: suffering in silence rather than seeking support, watching grades decline while maintaining the fiction of independence.

In a traditional school, Amaya’s trajectory might have continued downward. Teachers would interpret her silence as disengagement. Low grades would become self-fulfilling prophecy. But Building 21’s competency-based system created different possibilities. The “no penalty for learning” philosophy meant revealing gaps wouldn’t permanently harm her standing. Teachers explicitly taught metacognitive strategies, including recognizing when you’re stuck and seeking appropriate support.

“And then later throughout that year, I learned that it wasn’t bad for me to ask for help. It honestly benefited me.”

That single sentence captures a profound transformation. Amaya didn’t just learn content she’d been missing. She developed metacognitive awareness about her own learning patterns, recognized changeable behaviors rather than fixed limitations, and adjusted strategies based on evidence. She learned to learn.

By senior year, Amaya had discovered teaching as her calling through authentic classroom experience in Building 21’s education preparation elective. “This year, I’ve had the opportunity to be in an elective called education preparation. They prepare you to learn how to work in a classroom with teachers, which honestly really helped me.” More fundamentally, she had overcome social anxiety that once imprisoned her: “I learned to be a more open person and speak to other people. Also, I don’t feel like as inside.” That phrase, “I don’t feel like as inside,” captures liberation from internal imprisonment, the shift from anxious silence to confident self-expression.

The Model: Competency-Based Learning Making Growth Visible

Building 21 operates on a conviction that traditional grading systems obscure what students actually know and can do. A B+ in English reveals little about whether a student communicates effectively, thinks critically, or collaborates productively. Building 21 replaced that opacity with radical transparency.

The Four-Domain Framework

All learning is organized around four competency domains. Content Knowledge encompasses traditional academics organized around demonstrated competency: reading, writing, mathematical reasoning, scientific investigation, historical analysis. Habits of Success captures behavioral capabilities essential for learning: self-direction, organization, collaboration, perseverance. Next Generation Essential Skills addresses what employers and colleges consistently identify as critical: communication, critical thinking, creativity, technology. Wayfinding & Personal Development recognizes that preparing students for life means helping them discover who they are: identity development, purpose and vision, financial literacy, health and wellness.

Each competency progresses across 12 stages with detailed learning progressions. Building 21’s internal research shows that achieving Stage 10 translates to college and career readiness. The specificity matters. Rather than vague goals like “be a good writer,” students see clear progression: Stage 6 writers “produce organized paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting details.” Stage 9 writers “craft sophisticated arguments supported by carefully selected evidence and respond effectively to counterarguments.” Students know exactly what improvement requires.

The Beacon Learning platform makes this framework tangibly visible. Students see their current stage on each competency, target levels, detailed learning progressions showing what each stage

requires, evidence collections supporting their current level, and historical progress tracking showing development over time. Students and teachers know what competency they are working on at all times and understand the skills they need to demonstrate.

The “No Penalty for Learning” Philosophy

Building 21’s approach to assessment fundamentally changes students’ relationship with learning. Students’ progress on competency levels is honored. The grade calculation only takes into account where a student ended, not where they started. Students can revise work and have multiple opportunities to demonstrate competencies. Students who exceed their performance levels can earn honors credit, which supports equity and encourages students to exceed minimum targets.

In traditional systems, every assessment risks lowering your grade. This creates defensive, risk-averse learning. “No penalty for learning” eliminates that. Students can attempt challenging work without fearing permanent penalties. If an ambitious project reveals gaps, the competency level stays where it is until evidence demonstrates growth. It never decreases as punishment for trying something difficult.

Connor’s reflection captures the cultural shift: he learned “to view feedback as an opportunity for growth rather than a sign of failure.” In traditional systems, feedback threatens your grade. At Building 21, feedback guides improvement without penalty.

Seen Through a Durable Skills Lens

Building 21 didn’t build its framework from durable skills research. They built it from deep knowledge of their students and conviction that traditional grading fails the students who need the most support. What they constructed aligns remarkably with the research. Habits of Success maps to Fortitude, Growth Mindset, and Metacognition. Next Generation Essential Skills captures Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Collaboration. Wayfinding develops Agency and Informed Vision. And the “no penalty for learning” philosophy operationalizes Growth Mindset structurally: capability really does develop through effort here, because the assessment system rewards growth rather than initial performance.

In Practice: Two Student Journeys

Amaya: From Silent Struggle to Teacher Identity

Amaya entered Building 21 with significant communication anxiety and help-avoidance patterns. She struggled through assignments she didn’t understand, submitted incomplete work rather than admit confusion, and fell progressively behind while teachers remained unaware.

Building 21’s structures systematically addressed each dimension. The “no penalty for learning” system made asking for help safe. Teachers explicitly taught metacognitive strategies. Advisory provided consistent support from an adult who knew her deeply. Socratic seminars in ELA and history classes provided regular, scaffolded communication practice.

Her breakthrough came through experimentation and evidence: she observed concrete improvement when she asked for help, providing evidence that changed her beliefs about help-seeking. By sophomore year, she could articulate: “I wasn’t really like last year. I was never really focused, so now I’m like really invested and interested in what they’re teaching me because they explained it well.”

The education preparation elective placed her in real classrooms. Through authentic experience, she shifted from vague interest in “art related majors or something” to clear career direction: “Being here at Building 21 has helped me learn that I’m more into education. I want to become a teacher.”

THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS: METACOGNITION · COMMUNICATION · AGENCY · GROWTH MINDSET

Amaya’s transformation illustrates what happens when assessment structures align with growth philosophy. The “no penalty for learning” system didn’t just protect her from punishment. It created conditions where help-seeking became a strategy rather than an admission of failure. Her evolution from “I don’t feel like as inside” to aspiring teacher with authentic classroom experience demonstrates how Attention to Context works: Building 21 designed its system for students who arrive behind, who carry valid skepticism about school, who need evidence that effort actually matters before they’ll invest it.

Brianna and Kiara: Communication Growth Through Practice

Brianna and Kiara, ninth-graders, entered Building 21 with common freshman communication challenges: nervousness about speaking in class, uncertainty about contributing, limited confidence in expressing ideas.

Brianna described the primary vehicle of her growth: “The Socratic seminars and our ELA and history classes. They will encourage me to speak up more and say what I say, get it out there.” The phrase “get it out there” shows she understands communication involves sharing internal thoughts externally, a basic truth many struggle to articulate.

Kiara expanded: “I feel like since I’ve been at the school I’ve changed. The Socratic seminars, the circle, has given me more confidence to speak up and say what I want to say and have better communication with my peers and people outside of school.” Her recognition that skills transfer “outside of school” shows early understanding that competency development serves purposes beyond graduation requirements.

THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS: COMMUNICATION · COLLABORATION · FORTITUDE

What’s striking about Brianna and Kiara’s reflections is their sophistication as ninth-graders. They can already identify what’s developing (communication), name the mechanism (Socratic seminars, circle protocols), and recognize transfer (skills working “outside of school”). That metacognitive awareness, the capacity to see and name your own growth, is exactly what the competency framework is designed to build. Building 21 makes communication development impossible to avoid because the structures require it, then makes the growth visible so students can own it.

What Makes It Work: Where Building 21 Excels

Every school in The Path Forward study embraces the three core principles and draws on the four amplifiers to varying degrees. Building 21 demonstrates all of them. Three stand out as genuinely distinctive.

Full Integration: Competency-Based Everything

Building 21 represents the most complete integration model in the study. Every piece of work connects to competencies. Studios, internships, exhibitions, advisory discussions: all assessed using the four-domain framework. There are no separate “skill development activities.” Skill development is the purpose of everything.

When students write research papers, teachers don't just grade the paper. They assess which competencies the work demonstrates: Written Communication, Critical Thinking, Research, Technology. The same work provides evidence for multiple competencies. Students can't succeed with strong content but weak collaboration, or strong skills but weak content. The integration is critical.

Studios, Building 21's signature curricular structure, organize learning around authentic problems rather than content sequences. A studio might investigate "How can Philadelphia address food insecurity?" requiring research, data analysis, persuasive communication, and community engagement simultaneously. Studios are designed so that students have choice in both content and how they show evidence of mastery. What doesn't change is the competency framework and learning progressions.

The weekly elective day, taught by industry professionals ranging from video game design to culinary arts to cosmetology, extends integration by providing systematic career exploration. The offerings are intended to be both windows and mirrors, helping students see themselves in spaces of interest and exposing them to unfamiliar opportunities. Teachers also select electives to teach based on their passions, and the structure enables additional academic and social-emotional support through small group instruction and mentoring programs.

Clear Identification: Radical Transparency Through Beacon Learning

Building 21's competency system is the most granular in the study. Twelve developmental stages per competency, with detailed learning progressions showing exactly what performance looks like at each level. Students don't wonder what improvement requires. The learning progressions include concrete performance indicators and examples.

The Beacon Learning platform makes this transparency operational. Students see their current stage, target levels, evidence collections, and historical progress. When a student believes their work demonstrates a higher level than assessed, they can make that case using criteria and specific evidence. The competencies and learning progressions provide a shared language that staff across the school utilize when teaching and assessing these skills.

Kiara's communication development illustrates the power. She can see her growth because the school made the competency visible, provided practice contexts (Socratic seminars, circles), and tracked her development systematically. When she says the experience gave her "more confidence to speak up," she's articulating development in an explicitly defined, systematically tracked competency.

The framework has recently been revised to better respond to the changing needs of learners in the age of AI, demonstrating that Building 21 treats its own structures with the same growth orientation it asks of students.

Attention to Context: Designing for Students Who Start Behind

Building 21 serves students from throughout Philadelphia, with 68% entering ninth grade significantly behind grade level. The school's entire design honors this reality rather than pretending it doesn't exist.

The 12-stage competency scales accommodate enormous range. Students might enter reading at Stage 3 while peers begin at Stage 8. Both can grow from wherever they are. There's no pretense that all ninth-graders arrive with identical preparation.

"No penalty for learning" protects struggling students from accumulated deficits. In traditional systems, students who enter behind fall further behind as poor grades compound. At Building 21, students who enter at Stage 3 can steadily build toward Stage 9 without penalty for starting point. Past struggles don't permanently define them.

Universal internships ensure all students access authentic professional learning, not just high-achievers. Partnership Coordinator Nabeedah Parker emphasized the equity commitment:

“Students are loved here at Building 21. So the whole model of we will take students, wherever they are, and try to meet them where they are, is very powerful.” Internships aren’t reserved for students who’ve already demonstrated success but provided to all students as a vehicle for developing success.

The school provides comprehensive wraparound support: a Behavioral Health Department, a School-Based Health Center, and advisors who coordinate with families and connect students to resources. This acknowledges that skill development requires a stable foundation. Students struggling with food insecurity, housing instability, or trauma need support beyond academic instruction.

Beyond Skills: Agency, Identity, and Possibility

What Building 21 ultimately produces extends beyond capabilities. It produces agency, professional identity, and informed vision.

Agency develops through the competency system’s transparency. Students who can see their own data can direct their own learning. They identify weak competencies and design work to strengthen them. They advocate for themselves using evidence rather than complaining without specifics. Amaya’s shift from avoiding help to strategically seeking it represents agency at its most fundamental: the recognition that you can change your own outcomes through deliberate action.

Professional identity forms through the universal junior internship program. Students don’t simulate professional work. They write actual code at Bentley Systems, contribute to medical research at Fox Chase Cancer Center, manage records for immigration law clients, and teach real children in elementary classrooms. When a student manages legal records and communicates with actual clients about billing, that’s not playing at being a professional. It’s being one. Principal Ben described one student’s immigration law work: “He has so much responsibility. I was like, Whoa, she’s letting you do that.”

Informed vision emerges from Building 21’s systematic four-year progression. Freshman Socratic seminars build basic communication confidence. Sophomore exposure experiences at Fox Chase Cancer Center, Germantown businesses, and professional sites provide concrete images of career possibilities. Junior internships test interests through authentic professional practice. Senior capstones pursue deep interests with maximum independence. By graduation, students’ choices are grounded in experience, not speculation. Amaya didn’t imagine teaching might be interesting. She experienced it and knew.

Transferable Insights for School Leaders

Make competency levels the only component of grades. When assessment rewards growth rather than punishing initial struggles, students who enter behind have structural permission to develop. Building 21’s “no penalty for learning” philosophy isn’t soft. It’s strategically aligned with how capability actually develops: through iteration, revision, and repeated attempts.

Require internships for everyone, not just high-achievers. Building 21’s 90%+ junior participation rate represents extraordinary equity commitment. Professional learning isn’t reserved for students who’ve already demonstrated success. It’s provided to all students as a vehicle for developing it.

Invest in transparency infrastructure. The Beacon Learning platform makes competency development visible to students, teachers, advisors, and families. Students who can see their own data can direct their own growth. The technology matters less than the principle: make learning visible so students can own it.

Design explicitly for students who start behind. Building 21’s 12-stage competency scales accommodate enormous range. The “no penalty for learning” philosophy protects against

accumulated deficits. Universal access to authentic experiences ensures equity. These aren't accommodations bolted onto a system designed for prepared students. They're the system's core design.

A Note on the Model's Limits

Building 21's results are remarkable. They are also the product of specific conditions: operation within a large urban district providing structural support, Pennsylvania's Pathway 5 graduation option enabling competency-based demonstration of readiness, a dedicated partnership coordinator cultivating internship placements, and years of investment in the Beacon Learning platform and competency framework development. Teacher shortages create implementation challenges, and competency-based assessment requires professional development many teachers haven't received. Replicating Building 21 wholesale is not the point. The point is that the underlying commitments, radical transparency in assessment, competency levels that honor growth, universal access to authentic professional learning, comprehensive support for students who start behind, and a system designed around the students it actually serves rather than the students it wishes it had, can be adapted across very different contexts. Building 21 proves they work. The work for other school leaders is to find their own version of the question: What would your school look like if you designed every structure around the belief that your students' capabilities are developing, not fixed?

This profile is part of a series documenting schools whose approaches have produced remarkable outcomes for students, and whose work, examined closely, illuminates how the capabilities researchers call durable skills develop in practice. It draws on interviews with Building 21 students, educators, and leadership conducted during the 2024-25 school year. All student names are pseudonyms.



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