



AMERICA
SUCCEEDS

PATHSMITH™
DURABLE SKILLS

Gibson Ek High School

Where Student Agency Drives Authentic Learning

Issaquah, Washington · Public School · Approximately 200 Students



“I definitely had some doubts going into Christmas, because it was such a new experience. But once I was able to find that footing and feel comfortable pushing myself to try things that are out of my comfort zone... those connections, those experiences and the advice I’ve been given by advisors and support, it’s going to stick with me for the rest of my life.”

— Olivia, Senior

School Snapshot

Location	Greater Seattle area, Washington
Type	Public school within Issaquah School District (Big Picture Learning model)
Enrollment	~200 students, grades 9-12
Structure	Competency-based progression, four-year advisory, student-driven internships, project-based Design Labs
Philosophy	Students learn best when they direct their own education through authentic work, sustained relationships, and personalized pathways

Who They Serve

Gibson Ek serves a racially and socioeconomically diverse student body: 67-68% White, 10-11% Hispanic/Latino, 8-10% Asian, 4% Black/African American, 10% two or more races. Fifteen to seventeen percent qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 25% have documented disabilities. The 15:1 student-teacher ratio enables deep personalization.

84-91%	graduation rate
85%	reading proficiency (above state average)
35th	of 437 Washington high schools
160+	colleges and universities accepting Growth Transcripts as alternative credentials
Multiple Pathways	Students attend selective universities (UW, NYU, UCLA), pursue trades, enter tech careers, follow arts pathways, or join the workforce directly

What Makes It Distinctive

- **Four-year sustained advisory relationships:** same advisor for all four years, 15 students per group
- **Students must secure their own internships** through cold outreach, networking, and professional communication
- **Competency-based progression** with a visual dashboard where growing trees represent skill development across 20 competencies
- **No traditional grades:** students advance by demonstrating mastery, not by accumulating seat time
- **Quarterly exhibitions** where every student presents growth to panels of advisors, community members, family, and peers

Opening: From Paralysis to Purpose

Olivia entered Gibson Ek carrying crippling anxiety and perfectionism. Every decision about classes, internships, even what to say in discussions triggered paralyzing worry about making the wrong choice. By Christmas of freshman year, the doubts had intensified. The unfamiliar landscape of self-directed learning, competency dashboards with growing trees instead of letter grades, and expectations that she design her own experiences felt overwhelming.

Then her advisor Jef did what sustained relationships make possible: he kept showing up. Not with platitudes about doing her best, but with a steady reframe. Failure is data, not a verdict. Let's look at what the rejection tells us. When sophomore year brought an internship search yielding fifteen straight rejections from veterinary clinics, Jef transformed each "no" into strategy feedback. They shifted from emails to phone calls to in-person visits, treating rejection as information about approach rather than judgment of worth. Finally, a clinic agreed to a shadow day. They liked her so much they kept her for two full years, and eventually hired her as an assistant.

Four years later, Olivia presents sophisticated veterinary mental health research to university professors, having navigated IRB approval, designed survey methodology, and pivoted her approach when the original plan proved unfeasible, all without the shame spiral that would have paralyzed her freshman self. "I've already taken college classes. I've been working in teams for four years. I know failure is part of the process."

Her journey captures what Gibson Ek does systematically: it builds structures that require students to direct their own learning, surrounds them with relationships deep enough to sustain that challenge, and creates authentic professional experiences where capabilities develop through real use. Olivia didn't overcome perfectionism through a lesson on growth mindset. She learned to work effectively despite it, through years of practice in a school designed to make that possible.

The Model: Personalized Pathways Through Authentic Work

Gibson Ek organizes education around a conviction that runs counter to most high school design: students develop most powerfully when they direct their own learning through work that genuinely matters. The school operates through six interconnected structures (four-year advisory, Design Labs, internships, personal projects and capstones, quarterly exhibitions, and a competency dashboard) that together create conditions where skill development becomes inevitable.

The Competency Framework: Making Growth Visible

At the center of the model sits a 20-competency framework organized across five categories. What distinguishes this framework isn't the list itself but how students interact with it daily through a custom-designed digital dashboard. Kaia, a sophomore, describes the system: "We have like trees, and they grow. You check off different aspects of a competency, the more filled out the tree is, the more you can see your growth."

Students don't passively watch competencies get checked off. They use the dashboard strategically to direct their own learning: reviewing gaps, designing projects to fill them, curating evidence, and advocating for their own achievement. One student described the thinking: "I'm like, I don't have enough writing. I'm gonna do a writing project... just filling in gaps is a big part of the dashboard." This self-directed competency management contrasts sharply with traditional systems where students passively receive grades.

The framework operates on a two-tier progression. Students complete Foundational and Advanced Foundational competencies in years one and two, then transition through a Gateway process to Mastery and Advanced Mastery levels in years three and four. The Gateway is both celebration and reset: students demonstrate substantial growth, gain recognition for what they've built, and face a fresh dashboard representing possibility rather than deficit.

Seen Through a Durable Skills Lens

Gibson Ek didn't build its model by consulting durable skills research. They built it by asking what students need to become self-directed, capable people. The 20 competencies, spanning scientific investigation, creativity and imagination, quantitative reasoning, collaboration, communication, and more, reflect deep knowledge of what genuine preparation for life requires. When examined through a durable skills lens, the alignment is striking. The dashboard's metacognitive demands develop exactly the self-awareness researchers identify as foundational. The internship search develops Fortitude and Communication simultaneously. The exhibitions build the habit of structured reflection that makes learning transferable. Gibson Ek arrived at these outcomes through its own path, and the convergence with the research conversation is powerful evidence that both are pointing at something real.

In Practice: Three Student Journeys

Isabella: From “Scared of Fish” to Environmental Advocate

“I used to be like scared of fish. I just thought they were weird. Little gross.” Freshman year, Isabella was “pretty lost” navigating the self-directed model. She had no clear interests beyond a vague notion of “maybe something with animals.”

Sophomore year, needing an internship and drawn to outdoor work, she ended up at the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery despite her fish phobia. The hands-on immersion, monitoring water quality, observing spawning behavior, handling fish during population counts, triggered something no classroom could: “And then I went to the Salmon hatchery. And I was like, oh my god, I'm in love with this.”

The discovery catalyzed intensive self-teaching that extended far beyond internship requirements. Isabella created personal notebooks filled with fish taxonomy, habitat requirements, and conservation strategies. She took on public education responsibilities, teaching visiting school groups about salmon ecosystems. By junior year, she was applying to colleges for marine biology with clear career direction and substantial practical experience. Traditional career counseling asking “what are your interests?” would have yielded nothing useful. Isabella didn't know fish conservation could be interesting because she'd never experienced it authentically.

THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS: CRITICAL THINKING · COMMUNICATION · FORTITUDE · GROWTH MINDSET

Isabella's transformation illustrates why Authentic Experiences matter so fundamentally. She didn't discover her direction through a career interest inventory or a unit on ecology. She discovered it through sustained, hands-on professional work with real organisms in a real ecosystem. The hatchery developed her Scientific Investigation capabilities through genuine practice, not simulation. Her evolution from someone afraid of fish to someone teaching the public about salmon conservation is a vivid example of what the research calls Informed Vision: career clarity grounded in actual experience rather than speculation.

Connor: The Mechanic Who Wouldn't Give Up

Connor knew exactly what he wanted: work on cars. Freshman year revealed a frustrating truth: wanting something and knowing how to achieve it are entirely different. He would jump into projects enthusiastically, then quit when they got hard.

Everything changed through an unlikely friendship. Oliver, a junior in Connor's multi-age advisory, had built a motorized bicycle and invited Connor to build one too. What seemed

like a fun project became an education in methodical engineering. Oliver taught him to use the school's metal lathe, precise, exacting work requiring patience rather than enthusiastic jumping ahead. Through four prototypes across freshman and sophomore year, Connor learned to break down complex problems, research solutions, and persist through iterative failure. The fourth prototype featured a fully self-charging electrical system he engineered himself: upgrading from 8-volt to 12-volt, integrating a motorcycle battery, wiring an LED floodlight, calculating how to balance the electrical draw. "I wanted it to work like an actual car."

Then came the internship search. Email after email to automotive shops yielded rejection or the non-reply that left him wondering if anyone had even seen his message. Ten, fifteen, twenty rejections accumulated. Within Jef's sustained advisory relationship, Connor learned to treat rejection as strategy feedback rather than personal judgment. Finally, Patrick at Midnight Motor Sports said "come on down." The shop specialized in 1970s BMWs, vintage cars requiring sophisticated mechanical knowledge and meticulous restoration. By senior year, Connor was a paid technician. "I'm a technician there. I'm working there," he said with evident pride. Not interning, not shadowing, but legitimately employed doing skilled work.

THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS: FORTITUDE · CRITICAL THINKING · COMMUNICATION · METACOGNITION

Connor's story became legend at Gibson Ek, told to freshmen facing their own internship rejections. It illustrates how Progressive Complexity works when driven by student interest: the motorized bicycle project built systematic thinking and persistence; the internship search developed professional communication and resilience; the placement at Midnight Motor Sports developed expertise through authentic professional work. Each stage prepared for the next. And the peer mentorship with Oliver demonstrates something the research identifies as powerful: Sustained Relationships aren't only between adults and students. Peers within multi-age structures can provide the modeling and partnership that accelerate development.

Lauren: Creating Space for Difficult Conversations

Lauren arrived knowing she wanted her work to matter beyond grades. By senior year, she was ready for work of unusual depth: researching sexual violence prevention education in partnership with King County Sexual Assault Resource Center. She would conduct fifteen interviews with young people about their experiences with sex education and prevention, work requiring extraordinary maturity, ethical sensitivity, and communication sophistication.

The weight was immediate. "It definitely has a lot of weight to it," Lauren reflected. But she also found unexpected meaning: "I think it has been validating for a lot of them, and that's been really neat for me to see." The Resource Center didn't condescend. They engaged Lauren as a research collaborator whose findings would inform their actual prevention programming and grant applications.

Lauren articulated something about her Gibson Ek experience that captures the model's deepest purpose: "I find that the better that I get at handling my own learning experiences, the more personal and meaningful my work is."

**THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS:
CHARACTER · COMMUNICATION · CRITICAL THINKING · LEADERSHIP**

Lauren's capstone illustrates what the research calls Full Integration: her competencies in research design, stakeholder communication, ethical reasoning, and professional collaboration didn't develop in separate courses. They consolidated through a single sustained project demanding all of them simultaneously. The Resource Center's treatment of her work as professionally consequential, using her findings in presentations and grant applications, created the authentic stakes that produce deep learning. And her reflection on self-directed learning becoming "more personal and meaningful" is a precise articulation of Agency: the capacity to direct one's own growth toward purposes that matter.

What Makes It Work: Where Gibson Ek Excels

Every school in The Path Forward study embraces the three core principles and draws on the four amplifiers to varying degrees. Gibson Ek demonstrates all of them. Three stand out as areas where the school's work is genuinely distinctive.

Sustained Relationships: Four Years of Knowing

The four-year advisory relationship is Gibson Ek's foundational structure. Each advisor works with 15 students who remain together for all four years. This isn't homeroom. It's deep mentoring that becomes students' primary support system throughout high school.

Advisor Jef captured its power: "It's really powerful to be able to work with a student for four years. We're just going to keep working on them, and let's focus on growth." The phrase, which might sound dismissive in other contexts, conveys profound commitment. Jef doesn't evaluate students as fixed entities. He sees ongoing development. The four-year timeframe makes this sustainable. When a student struggles freshman year, Jef doesn't worry. He has three more years.

This sustained knowing enables calibrated challenge impossible in brief relationships. When Olivia struggled with fifteen internship rejections, Jef could maintain high expectations while providing necessary emotional support because he knew her deeply: her perfectionism patterns, her anxiety triggers, what kind of support she needed at different moments. A teacher meeting her for the first time couldn't have done that.

Students repeatedly described feeling comfortable trying new things, expressing vulnerability, and acknowledging struggles because "my advisor knows me" and would help rather than judge. This safety proved essential. Skill development requires attempting communication approaches that might fail, exercising leadership that might falter, tackling problems possibly beyond current capability. Without relational safety, students don't take those risks.

Structured Reflection: Making Growth Visible Through Exhibitions and Portfolios

Three to four times yearly, every Gibson Ek student presents comprehensive exhibitions to panels of advisors, community members, family, and peers. These aren't presentations of single projects. Students present their growth across all competencies, using portfolios documenting evidence from internships, Design Labs, personal projects, and academic work.

The exhibitions develop multiple capabilities simultaneously: communication through regular high-stakes public speaking, self-reflection through required analysis of one's own learning, synthesis through connecting diverse experiences into coherent narrative, and confidence through successfully presenting and receiving feedback. Students describe a clear progression: freshman year brings terror but structured support. By senior year, they present with confidence showcasing sophisticated learning.

The diverse panel composition creates authentic accountability. Advisors ask questions based on years of relationship. Parents ask from care and interest. Peers ask relatable, authentic questions.

Community members ask from external perspective. Internship mentors speak to professional development. Students can't rely on any one relationship. They must genuinely communicate to varied audiences.

Between exhibitions, the portfolio system requires continuous curation: selecting evidence, writing reflections, articulating connections between experiences and competencies. This isn't end-of-year scrambling. It's an ongoing practice that develops the metacognitive habits essential for lifelong learning. Advisors push for depth: "How did you learn that? What do you need to work on? What approaches work best for you?"

Progressive Complexity: From Birdhouses to IRB-Approved Research

Gibson Ek deliberately scaffolds challenge across four years. The progression is visible across every structure.

In Design Labs, the eight-week, multi-age, project-based courses meeting three days per week, freshmen build species-specific birdhouses that teach design thinking through manageable complexity. The specificity matters: entrance hole diameter, interior dimensions, and mounting height are all determined by target species biology. Students learn to design within real constraints without being overwhelmed. By junior or senior year, students support Design Labs and contribute to teaching, demonstrating the progression from novice learner to someone capable of guiding others.

In internships, students work two days per week in professional settings. They must secure their own placements through cold outreach, networking, and persistence, supported by advisors and a school coordinator but ultimately responsible for initiating contact. The search process itself is formative. Olivia's fifteen rejections. Connor's twenty. Each taught persistence, professional communication, and strategic adaptation. Once placed, students function as junior professionals, not observers. Isabella monitored water quality and educated visitors. Olivia produced real campaign materials for her sustainability organization. Connor did transmission swaps on vintage BMWs.

In personal projects and capstones, the progression reaches its peak. Olivia's IRB-approved veterinary mental health research involved university partnerships, sophisticated methodology, and planned dissemination to professional audiences. Lauren's prevention research contributed to an organization's actual programming. Sae's Empty Bowls project required grant writing, securing a \$4,000 kiln from the school foundation, teaching a ceramics Design Lab, coordinating with restaurants and pottery studios across greater Seattle, and managing a public fundraising event that raised \$2,000 for the Issaquah Food Bank. These weren't simplified "student versions" of professional work. They were authentic contributions executed with appropriate scaffolding.

Beyond Skills: Agency, Identity, and Possibility

What Gibson Ek ultimately produces extends beyond capabilities. It produces agency: the capacity to direct one's own learning and life. Professional identity: a genuine sense of oneself as someone capable of doing real work. And informed vision: concrete, experience-based clarity about where one is headed.

Agency shows up everywhere. Students design their own learning plans, secure their own internships, curate their own portfolios, and present their own growth. They can't passively receive Gibson Ek's education. The structure demands they actively shape it. Lauren's insight captures this precisely: "The better that I get at handling my own learning experiences, the more personal and meaningful my work is."

Professional identity emerges through the authenticity of experience. Olivia sees herself as a researcher, not a student playing at research. Isabella identifies as an environmental advocate contributing to conservation, not a student learning about ecosystems. Connor recognizes himself as a skilled mechanic who can diagnose and repair complex problems. These identities formed through years of authentic work. When Connor's shop hired him as a paid technician, when Olivia's university mentor treated her as a research colleague, when Isabella's hatchery supervisors trusted her to educate the public. Those moments crystallized identities that classroom praise alone could never establish.

Informed vision appears in the specificity of their choices. Isabella's marine biology interest emerged from three years at the salmon hatchery, not from watching nature documentaries. Olivia's veterinary psychology direction developed through actual research with professionals. And students also develop informed rejections, discovering through authentic experience what careers don't fit. That negative knowledge prevents costly false starts and enables strategic decision-making grounded in genuine self-knowledge.

Transferable Insights for School Leaders

Prioritize relationship continuity over scheduling convenience. Four-year advisories aren't possible in all structures. But the principle, that sustained relationships enable calibrated challenge, applies universally. Even two-year looping beats annual turnover. The point isn't perfection but movement toward sustained knowing.

Let students struggle through the search. The easiest approach is school-coordinated internship placement. Gibson Ek does the hard thing: requiring students to find, pursue, and secure their own placements, with substantial coaching and support but not rescue. Olivia's fifteen rejections taught persistence, professional communication, and resilience that her eventual placement couldn't develop alone. The struggle is the learning.

Make skills visible so students can own them. Schools don't need Gibson Ek's exact dashboard technology. The principle, that skill development should be visible, trackable, and actionable, applies regardless of tools. When students can see their gaps and take initiative to fill them, they develop the metacognitive capacity to direct their own growth for life.

Build in public demonstration. Quarterly exhibitions create accountability, develop communication, and force synthesis. The public nature, presenting to people you respect rather than just submitting to a teacher, motivates preparation and performance exceeding what grades alone inspire. Start with one exhibition per year. Build from there.

A Note on the Model's Limits

Gibson Ek's results are remarkable. They are also the product of a specific combination of conditions: a 200-student enrollment enabling deep relationships, location in the resource-rich greater Seattle area, a state Board of Education that recognizes competency-based education and provides credit waivers for qualifying schools, and a school board that approved its operating charter within the Issaquah School District. Replicating Gibson Ek wholesale is not the point. The point is that the underlying commitments, including sustained advisory relationships, student-driven authentic work, visible competency tracking, public demonstration of growth, and progressive complexity across four years, can be adapted across very different contexts. Gibson Ek proves they work. The work for other school leaders is to find their own version of the question: What would it look like to trust students with genuine responsibility for their own learning?

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 Gibson Ek students, educators, and leadership conducted during the 2024–25 school year. All student names are pseudonyms.



PATHSMITH™
DURABLE SKILLS



America Succeeds

1390 Lawrence Street, Suite 200
Denver, CO 80204

www.AmericaSucceeds.org
info@AmericaSucceeds.org

