

Highlighting Excellence: New Vista's Success in Personalized Education

By Nathan Robertson and Zach Colick

It's not everyday you hear about high school students restoring a 1969 Pontiac Firebird.

This past fall Indigo Project, an education technology company headquartered in Niwot, Colorado, peered behind the curtain of New Vista High School to see what makes the school tick. Through this work, Indigo discovered a school that is excelling at personalized education. Based on the data insights, New Vista has cracked the code on how to connect with students. It's leading to the development of skills such as empathy and creativity, an open and collaborative environment, and helping students nail down who they are and what they are passionate about in life.

Indigo's data proves this. New Vista's faculty have the highest Steadiness Behavior (calm, loyal, patient) of any high school Indigo has worked with in Colorado. Additionally their Empathy Skill is far above the average corporate adult, and they are also highly motivated by giving back and making an impact in their students' lives (Social Motivator). These characteristics, identified by the Indigo Assessment, indicate New Vista's environment is a nurturing and stable place for a school that is "designed to cultivate the unique talents, gifts, and interests" of students.

To understand what New Vista is doing right, a deep dive is necessary to see who are the students, who are the staff, and what things are administrators doing to help align students, staff and themselves together. Understanding how Indigo shed light on what New Vista's process is and why that process works can launch larger conversations about what is the current state of other schools who are trying - and maybe struggling - to figure out who their students are and what the school culture is.

What if Test Scores Aren't the Most Important Thing?

Many schools today are focused on driving students toward the types of success that are easiest to measure. They would rather emphasize school-wide SAT scores and percentage of students going to a four-year university than evaluate how many students feel good about themselves and also feel prepared to pursue the future they want for themselves. It leaves out a lot of narratives about how schools are actually developing children as people.

Enter [New Vista High School](#): a school of about 300 students in the heart of Boulder, Colorado. New Vista is one of the schools that champions the idea of creating a safe, supportive and trusting environment for students. It's not about cutthroat competition. It's about an open, collaborative place where individual differences are respected and students are held to high standards for the betterment of the community. It's a nurturing environment that is designed to develop students in all aspects of their life.



However, this leads to a dilemma. How does a school like New Vista display these qualities to potential students and their families? How do they advocate for the model in a concrete way? What if test scores aren't the most important thing to measure?

New Vista, an Overview

New Vista opened its doors in 1993. For more than 20 years, they have been providing an alternative education experience to students who do not thrive under traditional models.

“One of the things we do really well here at New Vista is focus on the whole student through individualized instruction,” Principal Kirk Quitter said. “Ultimately, our aim is to meet students where they are and give them what they need to be more successful.”

As soon as you walk into New Vista, you can feel that the school is personalized for its students. The New Vista

community is creative, and student artwork is all over the walls. The students are also environmentally conscious, with posters on the wall announcing meetings for groups like Earth Task Force and classes such as Community Adventure Program, a quarter-long outdoor course that focuses on survival skills and how to reduce your eco-footprint. This is not a one-size-fits-all model, but a school that is clearly honing in on how to best fit the students that are coming through their doors.

In the spirit of a collaborative culture, classes are not separated by age. Instead, all classes have a variety of students from freshmen to seniors. It breaks down walls that sometimes occur when grades are isolated in their own cohorts. The result is a strong community where 14-year-olds and 18-year-olds are interacting in the same room and learning together.

This community is not just internally focused however. Once a week students can go out and engage with their city in Community Experiences. CEs can take many forms, ranging from professional experiences like working in a local architecture firm to partnering with nonprofits in the community. Regardless of form, students are going outside of their schools and advocating for themselves in roles and responsibilities with real organizations. This builds a sense of autonomy, independence and confidence that is critical for the development of our youth.

New Vista brings all these unique experiences to head with their Culminating Projects. The projects are senior capstones *a la* personalized learning - students complete an original, rigorous piece of work that is relevant or of great interest to them based on who they are. It dovetails the intensity of a traditional capstone with the individualized streak of the student. With a community like New Vista, projects stay wide, varied and



original; some past examples include ecological studies in Tasmania, interning at a school for autistic children, and restoring a 1969 Pontiac Firebird.

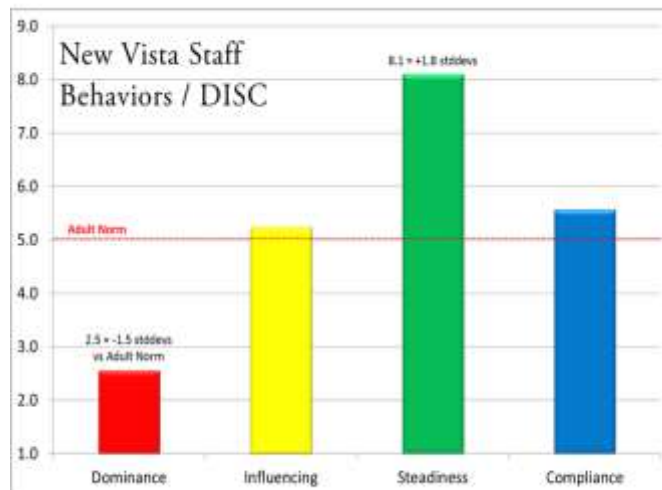
New Vista is a community based on the individual. It stresses individual discovery and provides opportunities to explore passions through a variety of projects and experiences. It also provides a collaborative space where all these individuals can engage in respectful dialogue with each other regardless of age. In terms of a school-student fit, New Vista fits its students like a glove fits a hand.

New Vista through the Lens of Indigo

This fall, Sheri Smith and David Kalish at [Indigo Project](#) worked with all the students and faculty at New Vista. They used the Indigo Assessment co-created with Target Training International to shed light on how New Vista is shaping students.

A Steady Staff

One of the areas the Indigo Assessment measures is Behaviors - how people communicate or “show up” in a room. One of the Behaviors measured is Steadiness: it embodies consistency, patience, loyalty, and how nurturing an individual is capable of being. When looking at the staff at New Vista, teachers showed up nearly two standard deviations higher than the average adult in Steadiness. This is the highest Indigo has seen in any school.



What does this say about the school? It says they are doing a good job at hiring. If the school is truly focused on individualized education and growing students in a holistic way, that requires a lot of additional time from teachers to form one-to-one relationships with students and invest additional time in each person. It requires patience, understanding, and a non-aggressive demeanor. With a staff this high in Steadiness, this team of teachers will constantly be thinking about how they can help provide the right environment for their students - and it shows. Teachers want outside guests and speakers to understand who their students are and what the culture is before they come because they want to make sure anyone working with their students provides a personalized experience fit to them.

They don't do it because of rules or compliance. They do it because they care that much about the students.



A Creative and Empathetic Student Population

Another area the assessment measures is Motivators - what drives a person, how they prioritize things in life. It measures between six different motivators. One of the motivators is Aesthetic: it embodies a desire for balance and harmony, and typically underscores a desire for some sort of creative or artistic outlet. Looking at the seniors, 50 percent of students indicated that Aesthetic was their number one Motivator.

Remember when I said there was artwork all over the school walls? That wasn't some school program that forced students to paint - students there are looking for an artistic outlet. The fact that the school is hanging up their artwork everywhere just means that the school is listening.

As a result, when looking at students' top 21st Century Skills on the test both Creativity and Empathy show up as top skills. Confidence in these skills are a direct result of being in an aesthetic, steady school built around student preferences.

A School that is Addressing Social Emotional Issues

The fourth and final section measured on the test is Social Emotional Health - measuring how people view both internal and external elements of who they are and the world around them. At Indigo, we typically see most schools have about 30 percent of their population showing up on the "Blue List" of students that may need additional social emotional support.

At New Vista, however, we see an interesting trend. While the school is known for attracting students that need social emotional help, the school is showing that the percentage of students in each grade that needs additional support is dropping marginally each passing year as they get older. The school is aware that its students need the additional support, and the test shows that they are doing things to help students that are working.

% Needing Social Emotional Support by Year

9 th :	34%
10 th :	34%
11 th :	26%
12 th :	24%

Conclusion

New Vista's model is different than the other schools in its district. It has an environmental emphasis and cares deeply about the state of its student community. It gives students a lot of flexibility to pursue their own path and passions. The assessment puts concrete numbers behind their culture. They are a school with an incredibly steady staff. Their students are developing skills they wouldn't be developing at any traditional



school in the district. On top of all that, students are finding closure in their emotional struggles as they begin to feel more and more confident and empowered to go into the future.

In other words, New Vista is a model that excels at their mission, and they now have scores to show that.

So what's next? New Vista will begin integrating curriculum around Indigo into their advisories. Additionally, counselors are beginning to use Indigo in one-on-one advising with students. More than anything, Quitter says it brings a *lingua franca* into the school to talk about the different attributes that make people who they are.

"The results mean a greater opportunity to serve the needs of our kids, and bringing that common language into our community is huge," Quitter said. "This process has had some big ripple effects from the classroom, into the advisory level and out into the community amongst parents."

It is our hope those ripples will continue to grow in starting conversations between students, parents and teachers about how to connect with students and help them find a college and career future that fits who they are.

