

Professional Development at Proyecto Vimenti

By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

vimenti
「espacio
para el
desarrollo」

by Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



ABSTRACT:

Proyecto Vimenti, Puerto Rico’s first public charter school, was founded to change the trajectory of students and families in one of the island’s most economically depressed and isolated communities. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) has been serving young people inside the Ramos Antonini Public Housing project for 50 years—operating an afterschool program focusing on education, health, life skills, leadership development, and arts. They serve 350 children and youth annually.

After decades of work with local youth, BGCPR leaders realized that the community’s families were locked into intergenerational cycles of poverty that made it nearly impossible for the young people they served to achieve upward mobility. They became convinced that they had to take a radically different approach implementing a two-generation model that includes opening a school and related services as interlocking pieces that would tackle education and poverty and provide opportunity for young and their families.

Vimenti is authorized and overseen by Puerto Rico’s Department of Education under Act 85, the education reform bill passed in March 2018 as an Alliance (charter) School. This is one of three papers documenting lessons about finance and operations, professional development, and student support from the first year and a half of Proyecto Vimenti’s start-up phase. The goal is to inform the next phase of work and to help other Puerto Ricans consider the implications for other Alliance- and Department of Education-run public schools. The authors conducted structured interviews with more than 20 members of the Vimenti community, including parents, teachers, administrators, board members, consultants, funders, and officials from the Puerto Rico Department of Education.

“Professional development is very important because the work of a teacher is like the work of a doctor: if you studied education 15, 20, 25, 30 years ago and you stayed with what you learned at that time you are obsolete. Education is a field where research is ongoing, there are new findings, there are new methods, and the teacher has to learn constantly and reflect on his/her practice, and look at new research because the education that we have today it is not the same education of so many years ago.

- Vimenti teacher



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The Vimenti model requires teachers and staff to have a unique skill set. And a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement. This paper describes what lessons can be learned from Vimenti’s early experience recruiting and training educators for their model:

- What unique teaching skills were required for the model to work?
- How did Vimenti find and prepare their teachers?
- What barriers did they face in terms of the talent pool?
- What were the most effective mechanisms for helping teachers grasp the model and what would be required of them?
- What types of ongoing support were put in place and how did the supports evolve over time?
- What questions need to be asked in the future to help grow and sustain the talent pool for Puerto Rico’s charter schools?

Unique Skills Required
for the Model to Work

The founding team for Vimenti envisioned a school like none that existed in Puerto Rico—one that would permanently lift children and their families out of poverty. It would have the best of everything, including teachers. Students would have the same academic curriculum as students in elite private schools, and the same enrichment opportunities as children from other social levels have, such as entrepreneurship, art, and nurturing extracurricular activities. And their families would have educational, employment, and networking opportunities.

In the classroom, the vision was for high academic expectations, instruction geared to students’ unique academic needs, and a positive approach to behavior management. Teachers at this school would be expected to teach to the very highest levels with students and families with the very highest needs.

On top of the pedagogical skills required to teach at Vimenti, teachers would be working in a new and innovative organization that would regularly test and refine its model. The implications for teachers was intense. As Bárbara Rivera, director of Proyecto Vimenti, described,

“Vimenti teachers not only have to be excellent professionals, but they also “have to have heart and commitment.”

It would be difficult to find such talented and mission-aligned teachers in the mainland U.S., but Puerto Rico’s context made the challenge all the more daunting.

The average Puerto Rican teacher makes \$29,000 a year—and opportunities abound for bilingual teachers to double their salaries on the mainland. As a result, the island has seen a mass exodus of teachers. Districts on the mainland actively recruit and hire away some of Puerto Rico’s best talent. A shortage of teachers with English language skills exacerbates the problem. What’s more, the existing teaching corps’ training was dramatically different from what Vimenti had planned for the school. The founding team knew they would have to take extraordinary measures to find the extraordinary teachers they wanted.

Finding and Preparing Vimenti Teachers

Indeed, recruiting quality teachers was the school’s primary challenge in the first year.

To find the best possible teachers, Vimenti would pay more than any other Puerto Rican entry-level teachers made. A new Vimenti teacher makes \$40,000 a year—\$5,000 to \$6,000 more than teachers at any other Puerto Rican school, public or private. The hiring team looked for three qualities: experience at the K–3 level, an appetite to learn, and interest and commitment to the mission and approach of the project.

Interviews began in January 2018, seven months before the school was to open, and continued with many rounds of interviews over the next several months. Rivera described it as an exhaustive process:

“Honestly it was very difficult for us to get bilingual staff or get people who were aligned with our cause, our mission, and also that they understood the educational methodology that we were going to implement.”

There were few qualified applications for the teaching positions.

In the end, the work paid off and Vimenti ended up with what Rivera called an “extraordinary faculty” made up of both experienced and new teachers, some from Head Start, some from Saint John’s School or other private schools, and one who’d been with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (Vimenti’s parent organization).



Elizabeth Greninger, a consultant hired to align Vimenti’s curriculum and professional development, observed that Vimenti teachers were “really responsive, open, eager, and willing,” and that even the teaching assistants were very invested and bright. Having worked in traditional Puerto Rican schools previously, Greninger thought it was helpful that Vimenti teachers didn’t come from the traditional system, where she found teachers could be resistant to new approaches.

Helping Teachers Prepare for and Implement the Model

Despite the quality of their first hires, Vimenti knew their teachers would need many supports to be ready for the school year. The first two teachers, hired in March, job shadowed at Saint John’s School to familiarize themselves with the curriculum Vimenti wanted to replicate. Most of the rest started in June and trained all summer before the school opened. Their training included a strategic retreat to learn about the entire Vimenti project, as all three pillars of the project—academic, social, and economic—would launch at the same time. The training was delivered in themes: teachers learned about the background and strategy of the project, the reality of poverty, the basic curriculum and academic model, policies and procedures, and the distinct culture and norms of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico.



Teachers also had a chance to learn about their students’ academic and social-emotional needs. At the start of the school year in August 2018, Vimenti held a family retreat where teachers learned about their students’ backgrounds, including their academic, social, and health needs.

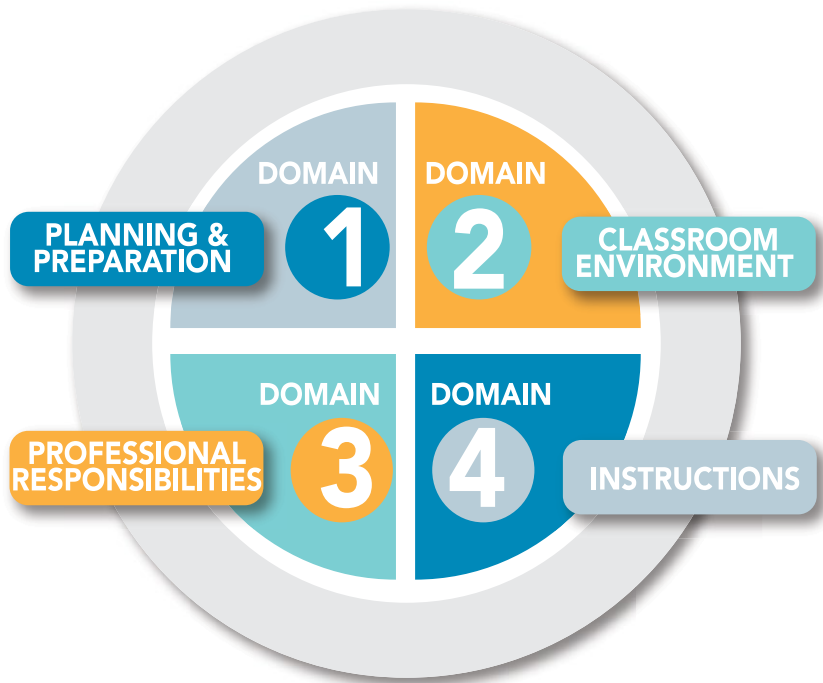
Notably, during this summer intensive teachers did not receive training in classroom management, schoolwide student behavior systems, or special education—all of which proved to be some of the greatest challenges they encountered in their first year.

Once school started, teachers had access to ongoing professional development to continue to deepen their understanding of the model. Initially, teachers had a designated half day of professional development each Friday, though in the first year they did not always get the entire planned time. During this time, teachers might analyze student data, work on positive behavior interventions, or problem solve with curriculum consultants. The school was implementing the Danielson Framework¹ and Danielson coaches regularly observed in

classrooms and provided specific feedback for how teachers could improve their instruction. Eventually, Vimenti added Saturday professional development sessions to give teachers additional support.

Vimenti’s principal and teachers also went on trips to New York and Washington, D.C., to see how other schools handled behavior and created classroom routines and schoolwide structures. Vimenti supported two teachers to receive their teacher certification from the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education² where they learned specific and focused strategies (Orton-Gillingham approach) for teaching literacy to students with diverse needs.

One Vimenti teacher told us that the amount of professional development teachers receive at the school is higher than she experienced at other schools—and what really distinguishes professional development at Vimenti is the consistency and follow up, for which she says there is “no comparison.” Much of that intensity of support is due to the external partners brought in to support teacher growth.



DANIELSON
FRAMEWORK

¹ “The Framework for Teaching,” the Danielson Group website, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://danielsongroup.org/framework>.
² “About Us,” Institute for Multi-Sensory Education website, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.orton-gillingham.com/about-us/>.

Outside Expertise and Support

In the first year of operation, Vimenti teachers had access to a range of experts.

The Danielson Group, a nonprofit that has a well-regarded framework for teacher instruction, feedback, reflection, and adaptation, was a key consultant in the first year, visiting the school every six weeks. Lee Kappes, Director of Professional Learning and Program for the Danielson Group, helped Vimenti’s principal use the framework to observe, collect evidence, and provide objective feedback. She also worked with teachers and aides to deepen their understanding of the tool, instill practices of being an effective teacher, including classroom management and behaviors. Teachers felt the Danielson framework and related coaching were some of the best professional development they received in the first year because it was concrete and based on specific feedback from classroom observations. They felt they were able to develop a positive and thorough understanding of the framework, which will eventually be used to evaluate their performance. One teacher told us,

“Danielson has been very good for me because Danielson measures different aspects in the classroom and helps you think about everything, not only in one class at the time you are teaching, but when planning for each student.”

Elizabeth Greninger, a curriculum consultant, started working with Vimenti part way into the first year to help adapt the Saint John’s School curriculum to the unique needs of Vimenti’s students and to Puerto Rico’s standards and assessments. Greninger’s first report showed that Saint John’s curriculum would have to be significantly adapted to

meet student needs. In particular, most kindergarten instruction at Saint John’s was in English, but Vimenti students had little to no exposure to English and needed more Spanish instruction. Greninger also found that the curriculum, designed for more advantaged private school students, had to better align to Puerto Rico Department of Education standards and needed more cultural context so “kids from poverty could relate.” Greninger worked to help teachers break down and plan their lessons, not just take the curriculum off the shelf. In Vimenti’s second year, Greninger is helping the school align professional development to the curriculum.

While she is primarily focused on academics, Greninger says working with teachers at Vimenti inevitably involves more than that.

“Vimenti is educating the whole child—that is the hallmark of their work. The community-based model—health, safety, and academics together—is special.”

In practice, that means talking about classroom routines and social-emotional strategies, such as greetings, checking to see if students are ready to learn, and having parents understand how to support their child at home. Vimenti teachers, Greninger says, are given the freedom and blessing to address the full spectrum of their students’ needs. Teachers felt the training was excellent.



The Children’s Health Fund was involved in the design phase and began providing technical assistance in February 2018. Vimenti teachers were not getting any training in these practices and they were not emphasized in their evaluation framework, according to CHF staff. As a result, they were unable to de-escalate difficult behaviors, which led to burnout and turnover. One teacher told us,

“I had never worked with children who suffered this level of trauma; that is, I did not know what to expect, what to do.”

Teachers have so far appreciated the workshops about the impact of trauma on children’s brains and restorative behavior practices, but are also clear that they have not yet received the support they need to put those ideas into practice.

Saint John’s School’s head of school, Lorraine Lago, and elementary school principal, Maika Marchán, sit on Vimenti’s governing board and provided ongoing advising to teachers and the principal. Initially, the two helped with academics, and curriculum in particular, given that the Saint John curriculum was meant to be implemented wholesale. During start-up they helped hire teachers, assess students, and essentially created the same physical space as Saint John’s classrooms. Once it became apparent the curriculum would have to shift, they helped with that as well. Lago described why and how:

“The idea was that children would be immersed in the same experiences so they would get the same outcomes. But the background of students was very different.”

Lago and Marchán also helped Vimenti leaders from the Boys & Girls Clubs—who had never run a school—by explaining the little things they do at Saint John’s to support teachers. “In the corporate world,” Lago explained,

“they don’t do the touchy-feely aspect of [human resources]. Educators need that hug or a surprise lunch sometimes.”

Professional development at Vimenti, one consultant told me, tries to be responsive to teacher needs. A significant portion of professional development time has been devoted to understanding how to help teachers differentiate instruction to ensure that all students can master the standard they are asking them to do, regardless of where they are starting.



First Year Challenges

Despite all of these intensive efforts, it was impossible to fully prepare even more experienced teachers and administrators for the reality of teaching in a brand new school with a novel model, especially given that students’ needs and academic gaps—even in kindergarten—were more intense than anyone had anticipated or planned for. As one teacher described to us, “Well, the first challenge we face is that the children arrive with an academic and developmental lag, that is, a brutal lag.” Students, she explained, came to them not having the fine motor skills to hold a pencil, not knowing about letter sounds or shapes, or—for some—not even having seen books or lettering in their homes.

This “brutal lag” meant that the school had to not only dramatically adapt their planned curriculum, but teachers who had taught in a private school setting also had to significantly adapt their instructional approaches, especially to classroom management and differentiated instruction. Even though class sizes were kept small, at around 17 students per class, the diversity of need—both academic and social-emotional—was greater than most teachers had dealt with. One observer put it bluntly:

“Classroom management and the schoolwide approach to discipline approach didn’t work. Teachers hadn’t worked with that population... The school was unprepared for the learning behaviors and lack of self-control that students had. Part of the problem was that several teachers hadn’t been in that setting before, but there was a cultural aspect too: there was a high level of acceptance for some of the behavior. A much more trauma-impacted population of learners came up against a staff that was largely coming out of private school setting.”

An outgrowth of the struggles with classroom management was that Vimenti’s principal ended up having to prioritize her time on addressing discipline issues and couldn’t focus on supporting teaching and learning. The principal and educational director left the school after the end of the first year. On top of adapting curriculum and other start-up adjustments, managing change ended up being a constant in the school’s first year. Bárbara Rivera and other Vimenti

leaders worked to maintain staff coherence and to create a synergy of work with Vimenti’s mission and strategic vision. Rivera says they constantly helped everyone through the change by returning to the mission: eradicating child poverty, how that will be achieved, what the path is.

“Teachers’ workload and retention are directly related to the amount of trauma students experience,” one of Vimenti’s external partners noted.
“People who work in poor communities are used to struggling, but because of the shooting this year and other issues, Vimenti has had more than its share of start-up challenges.”

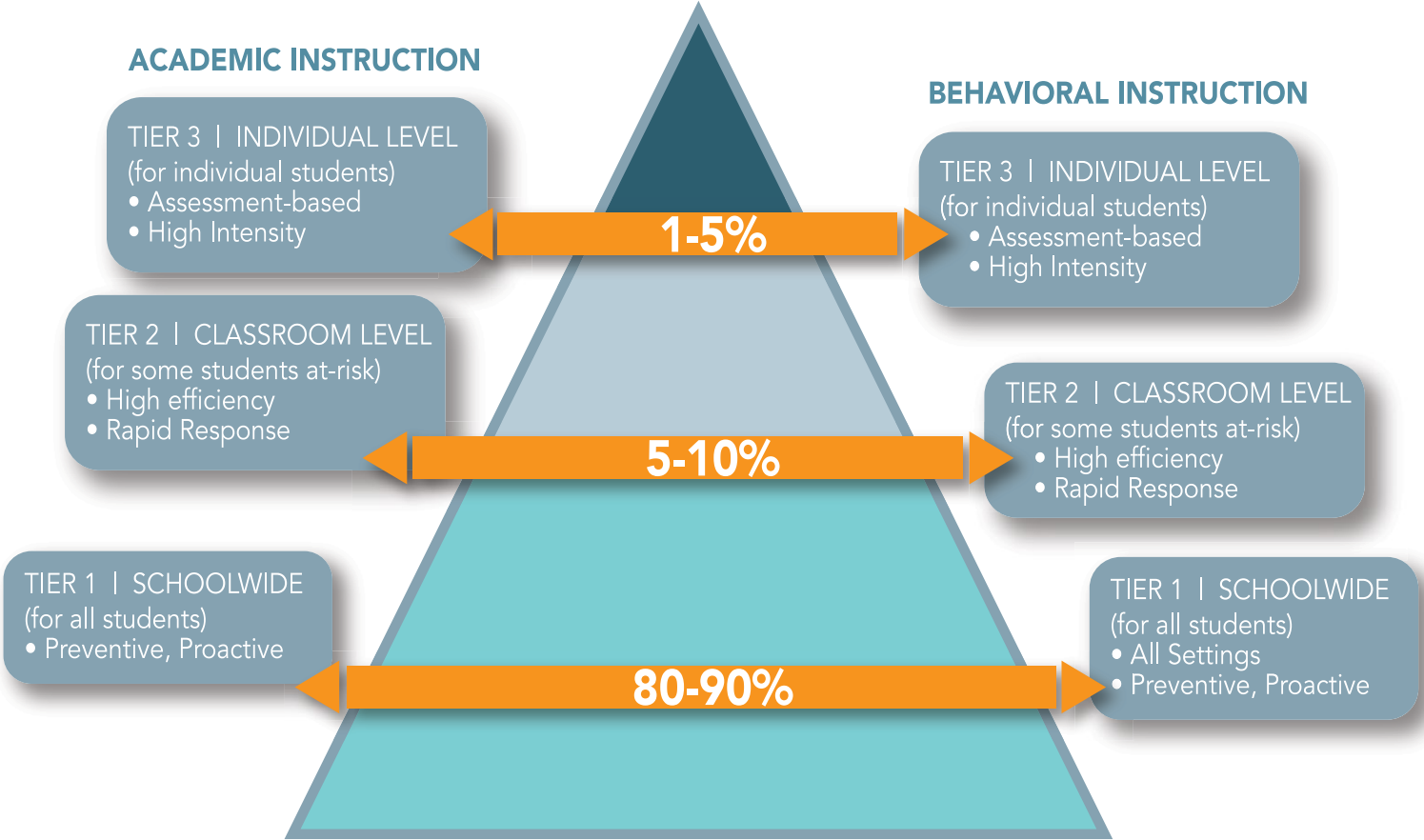
Teachers have received an increased level of support in classroom management and appropriate behavioral interventions for students, but much more is clearly needed and desired.

The school is also still figuring out how to use data to improve. A lot of emphasis is placed on assessment in early reading skills, but according to at least one observer, the school hasn’t yet figured out how to do that without too much emphasis on testing. They are working to embed assessments in the curriculum and reinforce it in professional development.

Special education is also not yet integrated into the rest of professional development, a concern given that nearly a third of Vimenti students qualify for special education supports. One of the more experienced teachers at Vimenti told us,

“I would love to have a little more knowledge about how to handle it in the classroom—the rules, what are my responsibilities as a teacher with these special education children?”

MULTI-TIERS



Reference: Designing Schoolwide Systems for Students Success



Lessons Learned

Focus on support and improvement. From all of our interviews, we heard consistently that Vimenti's early attention to hiring for openness and commitment to mission and then providing intensive professional supports paid off. Teachers had 90 minutes of planning time each day, a half-day block on Fridays, and a month over the summer. This is much more than most U.S. public schools, which typically provide only 45 minutes per day.³

By all accounts, teachers at Vimenti grew in cooperation and openness and appreciated supportive, not punitive, efforts to help them get better. Teachers are evaluated on performance but for the most part, the first year focused on growth and learning and on the values and responsibilities defined by the Danielson framework. (Most teachers are not yet "distinguished" in the Danielson framework, but they are not yet expected to be.)

Great talent is not enough. Even with experienced teachers, administrators realized they had to do much more planning, more intentionality, and more connecting the dots: student to teacher, teacher to teacher, and teacher to parent. For example, one of the reasons behavior management was so difficult during the first year was because there was no coordinated schoolwide plan. Teachers, administrators, social workers, and parents were not having conversations about student needs and strategies out of concern for student confidentiality.

Depth of student need. Another lesson learned was that despite having worked with the local community, the depth of student need wasn't fully apparent until well into the first year. This might have been identified earlier with more intensive intake assessments with families and students and better strategies for addressing those needs: creating tiered levels of behavior and intervention and clear plans for who would manage those interventions.

An ongoing concern is that, with such a complex model and intensive student need, teachers are overwhelmed and overloaded. By some reports, teachers are working nights and weekends and still do not have grade-level planning time. Vimenti recognizes the challenges of work in turning around underperforming schools. While there is goodwill now, that may eventually turn into bitterness. Vimenti must attend to its teachers' work-life balance.

The leadership team is aware of this challenge. Rivera

“*says she and the board are focused on how to balance the energy this project requires and “the emotional load it has.” The school, Rivera says, seeks to have a positive climate not only for children but for the project team; they are working to maintain that climate so teachers want to be there, despite the size of the challenge.*”

Looking Forward

Proyecto Vimenti is currently focused on working through start-up challenges typical for most charter schools, but Eduardo Carrera, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Puerto Rico, is keenly aware that they also must plan for future challenges.

Talent acquisition, Carrera says, will be an ongoing problem. It was difficult and costly to put teachers on planes to see schools they wanted to emulate. Most new Puerto Rican teachers, he says, have not been exposed to high expectations. Dual-language teachers are especially hard to find. Vimenti, Carrera notes, cannot keep hiring from private schools. What's more, nearly half (14,000) of Puerto Rico's teachers are expected to retire in the next five years. Finding school leaders will be a problem, too. Vimenti has begun to look at moving successful teacher aides into teaching positions and may need to start its own training and recruitment program in the future.

Conclusion

Everyone seems to recognize the enormity of the challenge the Proyecto Vimenti project took on. The school is trying to hold to a very high academic standard because they see it as the only way out of poverty across Puerto Rican schools while dealing with an unexpectedly high number of children with severe needs. The fundamentals are in place and there is an ongoing commitment to improvement and to the school's mission, which teachers and consultants alike describe as special and important. One observer talked about the investment and excitement among teachers and administrators:

“*They have the right people to do the work. Everyone is making an investment collectively and individually. The habits and process foundations are being put in place. We just gotta work through [the challenges].”*”



³ Hannah Jarmolowski, "Teacher Planning and Collaboration Time" (blog), National Council on Teacher Quality, November 2017, <https://www.nctq.org/blog/November-2017:-Teacher-Planning-and-Collaboration-Time>.

