In January 2013, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) formally launched one of the nation’s first digital open badge systems. PASA pioneered badges that capture and publicly recognize what students have achieved through the alliance’s high-quality learning offerings in arts, STEM, civics, and other subjects.

Students can use badges to earn electives credits toward graduation from Providence public high schools and can include badges as part of their applications to local colleges, where admissions officers have expressed interest in their ability to document achievements beyond the classroom.

Connecting Real Learning to Real Life

Originally, PASA planned to launch badges by creating a system of learning pathways that would connect its programs for middle school and high school students and allow students to “level up” from badge to badge as their skills increased.

However, PASA found it more beneficial to build a foundation of badges for high school students that captures and describes their out-of-school time learning for school officials and college admissions officers.

This allowed a faster launch and has led to rapid acceptance of badges by both the Providence Public School District and Rhode Island College, which reviews student badges as part of its admissions process.

Badges allow students to demonstrate “a different type of learning,” said Holly Shadoian, assistant vice president for academic affairs at Rhode Island College, in a Providence Journal article on the PASA badges. Shadoian also suggested that badges could give borderline applicants “a competitive edge” by showing they had earned recognition for practical skills like critical thinking and communication.

Students like Bryan Norato, a participant in PASA’s high school initiative the Hub, have already put this idea into practice.

“I plan to show them off on social media and hopefully use them to get into a better college for my photography interest”—Bryan Norato

It appears his strategy has worked.

After graduating from high school, Norato entered the University of Rhode Island. He credits his experience earning badges with helping him build a diverse skillset, making him a more competitive college applicant.

Since January 2013, about 300 high school students have earned badges through PASA.

PASA staff, district teachers, and community partners work together to assess learning that takes place during 10-week educational experiences tailored to student interests, from dance to debate to creating Android apps to bike-building.
Lessons Learned

It’s the experience, not the badge.
While designing a badge that appeals to kids is important—and PASA brought young people into the design process—it is much more important to stay focused on the learning experiences and competencies that a badge will document.

Tie badges to concrete benefits.
Badges have to be more than just a digital trophy. When earning a badge opens the door to an internship, a job, college, or another tangible benefit, then badges truly engage both youth and institutions.

Be prepared to work around school technology.
As is common in public education, Providence Public Schools struggle with antiquated devices, limited budgets, and firewalls that make it hard to use the latest technology in school.

Use examples to explain badges.
Explaining digital badgeing to newcomers can be difficult. PASA recommends that groups using digital badges work together to pitch stories, craft messaging, and explain digital badges to new audiences.

Start small before attempting deep integration.
Instead of layering badges on existing systems, consider a custom infrastructure to keep maintenance costs down and make badges feel an organic part of a multi-tiered system.

“It’s not about the badge. It’s about kids learning to weld,” said Damian Ewens, president and CEO of Achievery, which served as the technical partner to PASA on digital badges.

It took statewide policy change and some financial investment to make this possible. Like about 40 other states, Rhode Island has shifted high school credit requirements away from seat time and toward demonstrations of proficiency, making it easier to award credit for learning beyond the traditional classroom.

“Good learning that is relevant and rigorous takes place in and outside of school,” said Providence chief academic officer Paula Shannon in a story in Education Week. “Expanded learning opportunities provide real potential to move the needle forward in education.”

Digital badges have become an integral part of PASA’s extended learning opportunities for high school students, and have won recognition from the Digital Media & Learning Competition, among others. And, for cities inspired by Providence’s success, there’s more good news: the cost of developing badging systems is dropping.

BADGES ACT AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN IN-SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING AND ALLOW ALL LEARNERS TO EXPRESS THEIR POTENTIAL.