



SAN LORENZO, PUERTO RICO

BTE Success Stories

BRIDGE TO EMPLOYMENT

Launched in 1992, Bridge to Employment (BTE) is a Johnson & Johnson initiative that prepares youth for brighter futures. For more information about BTE, visit www.bridge2employment.org

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Why BTE?

José Campeche High School, in the town of San Lorenzo in Puerto Rico’s central-eastern region, has long been a hub for the local community. The school serves a region where more than half of families with children are living in poverty, and where the unemployment rate—even before Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017—was nearly double the unemployment rate of the mainland United States. With the high school graduation rate also lagging and seeing low science and math scores on island-wide tests, José Campeche was looking for inspiration and opportunity.

That opportunity arrived with an offer from Ethicon, a Johnson & Johnson local operating company, to join them in implementing the BTE program in San Lorenzo. In BTE programs, Johnson & Johnson, secondary and postsecondary schools, and community organizations work together to develop programs that feature academic enrichment, career readiness and exploration activities, and higher education preparation. The programs aim to increase the number of students enrolling in higher education and pursuing careers in STEM²D (science, technology, engineering, math, manufacturing, and design) or health care. “I didn’t have guidance growing up,” reflected an employee volunteer from Ethicon, “I’m now able to help someone in my community.”

Joining Ethicon and José Campeche was ASPIRA Inc. of Puerto Rico, a community-based organization with a mission to, “foster socioeconomic well-being and the enhancement of the quality of life in Puerto Rico through education and leadership development in the individual, the family, and the community.” ASPIRA had more than 45 years of experience serving the island and brought another unique asset to BTE-San Lorenzo: they were already coordinating a BTE program in nearby Gurabo and Manatí. This experience meant they entered BTE-San Lorenzo knowing what to expect and what worked best. Even better, they could plan joint events to bring together students from San Lorenzo and Gurabo-Manatí.

Together, the BTE-San Lorenzo partners designed a program to help José Campeche students broaden their perspectives on health care careers. The partners recognized the gravity of the task ahead of them. As one employee volunteer explained, “It’s a big responsibility to help young people develop into adults.”

SITE PROFILE

Location

San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico

Grant Period

2014–2018

Sponsor

Ethicon

Coordinator

ASPIRA Inc. of Puerto Rico

Community Partners

José Campeche High School,
Universidad de Puerto Rico

Volunteers

25

Students Directly Served

50

Completion Rate

62%

BTE: Building Bigger Dreams

BTE-San Lorenzo set out to identify students who could benefit from BTE before they even enrolled at José Campeche. They identified students from tributary junior high schools who had middling grades or scores on island-wide math and science exams, students who were struggling but not yet in danger of failing. Students from among this cohort who attended a BTE orientation were eligible to join the program and BTE kicked off in the fall of 2015 with 50 students enrolled. BTE-San Lorenzo hosted a kickoff meeting with employee volunteers from Ethicon in attendance, demonstrating to students and parents that Ethicon was committed to BTE-San Lorenzo.

To improve students' *academic achievement*, BTE-San Lorenzo offered twice-weekly tutoring sessions for math, science, and English. They supplemented this tutoring with periodic educational workshops on important academic skills like studying habits, time management, and accessing community resources. To sharpen their newly acquired STEM²D knowledge, BTE-San Lorenzo students competed in the summer 2016 engineering competition for Virtual Educa, a multinational forum for education and innovation.

Beyond improving students' academic skills, BTE-San Lorenzo partners saw it as their duty to broaden students' horizons about potential careers. According to one Ethicon volunteer, "Students didn't know about potential careers or what they wanted to study. We opened their eyes."

To help students *explore careers and develop professional skills*, BTE-San Lorenzo hosted career fairs, company tours, work-readiness workshops and—joined virtually by BTE students from Pennsylvania and New Jersey and in-person by students from Gurabo-Manatí—a live viewing of an open-heart surgery by video link. More than a dozen Ethicon employees also volunteered as mentors to small groups of BTE students. The mentoring component of BTE-San Lorenzo was not without growing pains, but ultimately proved meaningful for students and mentors alike. "The BTE program has served me to improve my mentoring skills and transfer that knowledge to the next generation," recalled one Ethicon volunteer.

To support students' *transition to higher education*, BTE-San Lorenzo brought students on tours of local colleges and universities, like University of Turabo, EDP University, Mech-Tech College, EDIC College, and University of Puerto Rico. The University of Puerto Rico also offered assistance with college entrance and financial aid applications, as well as test preparation for the island's standard post-secondary entrance exam.

"[BTE] impacted me academically. It helped me improve my grades and it helped me decide what I want to study in the future."

-A BTE-San Lorenzo student



"BTE...has helped me to be clearer about what I want to study and how to be more responsible."

-A BTE-San Lorenzo student

Hurricane Maria put a halt to all this good work when it struck the island in September of 2017, just as BTE-San Lorenzo students began their final year of high school. The hurricane, “thrust us into new territory,” recounted one Ethicon volunteer. BTE-San Lorenzo was forced into a months-long hiatus as the school and community slowly began their recovery. José Campeche became a gathering place and nerve center of the San Lorenzo community, recovering power long before many students and their families. The BTE-San Lorenzo site coordinator went door-to-door to the homes of BTE students, checking on their well-being and delivering needed water, food, and supplies. Months after the hurricane, BTE-San Lorenzo partners continued to deliver relief supplies to the community while BTE students persevered in their studies.

Impact of BTE

Despite Hurricane Maria’s devastation, 31 students graduated from the BTE-San Lorenzo program and José Campeche High School in 2018. Ninety-five percent of those students will go on to higher education. At graduation, the school recognized BTE-San Lorenzo students’ successes with awards including:

- Two awards for academic excellence
- Seven awards to recognize the school’s highest level of academic achievement
- The Values Award was presented to all 31 BTE-San Lorenzo students to recognize their commitment to Responsibility, Civics, Kindness, Reliability, Respect, or Justice.

Ethicon’s volunteer mentors showed up for BTE-San Lorenzo students and saw the positive results of their commitment in real time. Mentoring, explained one volunteer, is all about, “making sure we deliver. We’re involved *and* invested in the children’s lives.” Over time in BTE, students built the confidence, will, and experience to collaborate in professional settings. Recognizing the contributions of her mentors, one BTE-San Lorenzo student said, “They work to prepare us for a better future.”

That better future will include higher education for nearly all BTE-San Lorenzo students and, perhaps, health care careers for the nearly 70 percent of students who planned to study health-related fields. “BTE provides an opportunity for opportunities,” said an ASPIRA staff member. BTE-San Lorenzo students seized that opportunity to build big dreams for their futures.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

74% improved their GPA by at least 10%

100% applied to at least one postsecondary institution

94% enrolled in higher education

100% felt confident in setting, planning, and reaching goals

93% were aware of STEM²D careers

69% planned to pursue careers in health or science

75% had parents or other community members engaged in BTE