

Stevens  
Initiative

# 2024 Impact Report







Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to introduce you to the Stevens Initiative 2024 Impact Report. The Stevens Initiative, a program of the Aspen Institute, is cultivating rising generations by championing global citizenship, empowering future leaders, and advancing the field of virtual exchange. In this report, we explore the people, programs, and partners who make it all possible.

In a world defined by global interdependence, our efforts to connect young people from diverse places and backgrounds through everyday technology have never been more important. Through virtual exchange, participants develop their understanding of the world and build critical thinking and cultural fluency skills needed to prosper.

In 2024, we continued to showcase the value and impact of virtual exchange to global leaders, changemakers, educators, and business leaders. We invested in proven and promising virtual exchanges. We demonstrated how virtual exchange prepares young people for the workforce, builds global competence, promotes language learning, creates new opportunities, advances climate action, and inspires lifelong learning.

We are deeply grateful for all the partners, advocates, and young people who are part of the growing movement for virtual exchange. Together, we will bridge cultural divides and connect humanity.

Thank you for your continued support.

**Christine Shiau**  
Executive Director  
Stevens Initiative

# 2024 HIGHLIGHTS



Amount  
Pledged



Youth  
Participants



Active  
Grants



Leaders  
Trained

## REACH



# Mission

Connect rising generations of leaders virtually, bridging the cultural divide to unite humanity through virtual exchange.

# Vision

Generate the next wave of global leaders to build peace and prosperity.

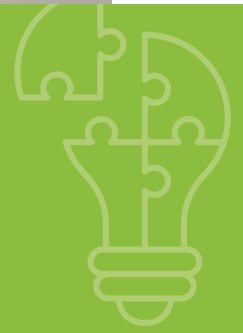
# Values

**Access:** We maintain that access to meaningful international exchange experiences should be a reality for everyone, including young people in low-income communities, in rural areas, and those with unique challenges.

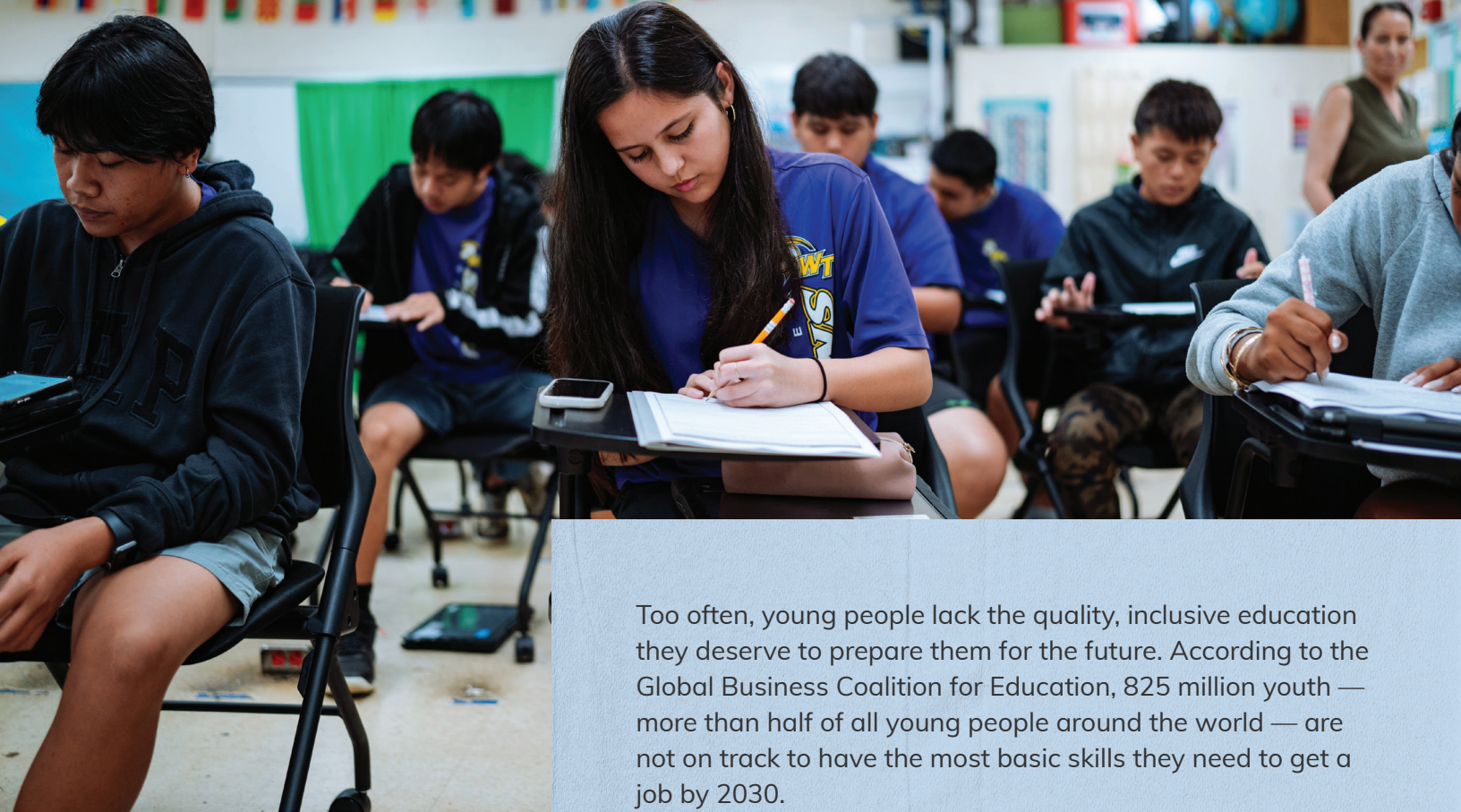
**Empowering Youth:** We invest in young people as profound changemakers in our local and global communities.

**Global Citizenship:** We honor the legacy of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens by promoting understanding and collaboration across cultures.

**Innovation:** We embrace creativity to reimagine what the future of global learning looks like and the scope and scale at which it can be implemented.



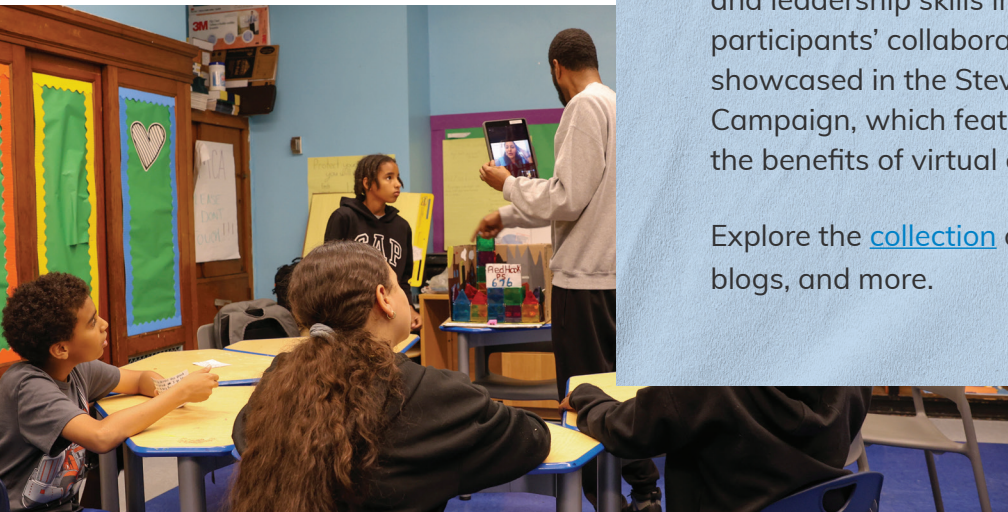
# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE EMPOWERS FUTURE LEADERS.



Too often, young people lack the quality, inclusive education they deserve to prepare them for the future. According to the Global Business Coalition for Education, 825 million youth — more than half of all young people around the world — are not on track to have the most basic skills they need to get a job by 2030.

The project-based learning of virtual exchange models the real-world experiences its participants will encounter in a cross-cultural workforce. In 2024, we created more opportunities for young people to develop the collaborative and leadership skills in demand across any industry. Our participants' collaboration and leadership was recently showcased in the Stevens Initiative's 2024 Spring Breakouts Campaign, which featured 16 multimedia projects illustrating the benefits of virtual exchange.

Explore the [collection](#) of videos, infographics, presentations, blogs, and more.





**Can you describe your current role and how you are leveraging the skills you gained from your virtual exchange experience in your professional life?**

It has been two years since I founded Wedonet, which is a platform that connects freelancers from more than 30 fields in Iraq to local and international clients. Participating in a virtual exchange helped me to expand my communication with international clients. Developing an international mindset and learning to work with people from different cultures was really beneficial for my communication, even still today.

**As an entrepreneur and creative, how did virtual exchange prepare you for a role outside of a traditional nine-to-five office job?**

While I was participating in The Experiment Digital, I was employed by some well-known companies in my home region of Kurdistan, Iraq. But being in a virtual exchange connected me much more to my local community. It helped me make international connections that enabled me to pursue Wedonet on a global scale. I have since traveled to more than eight different countries, including Australia, the U.S., Spain, Poland, and the Netherlands. When I strengthened my local and international community, it was easier for me to believe that I am a human of the earth, not a human of one country.

**The greatest benefits of participating in a virtual exchange are communication and networking. There is huge investment potential in connection. Networking is a better investment than gold, because gold has a set value, but the value of communication will always grow.**

**Why should institutions — such as universities or youth-serving organizations — invest in implementing virtual exchange programs for their students?**

Once you make virtual exchange an option for the young people you reach, you will see how these experiences change their mindsets. They will have bigger ideas, they will be more innovative, and they will become better entrepreneurs. They will have more confidence to work globally, not just in their local communities. If we make virtual exchange a must-have opportunity for young people, there will be a sea of positive change.

# MEET

## Ranja Ali

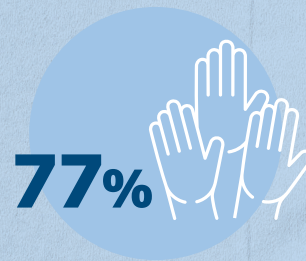
*Alum, World Learning's The Experiment Digital and Founder, Wedonet*



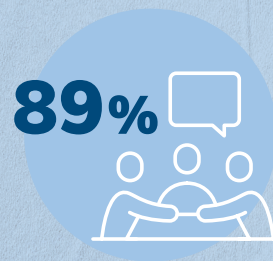
# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE CHAMPIONS GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP.

In a world defined by interconnectedness, young people need to collaborate across backgrounds and cultures. Yet, according to the Institute of International Education's 2023 Open Doors report, only about 6% of American college students, and even fewer younger students, study abroad. Furthermore, nearly 40% of Americans have never left their birthplace. According to PIE News, more than five million students, globally, study outside of their home country each year – less than 2% of all students enrolled in higher education. It is imperative to provide young people with opportunities outside of traditional study abroad to have meaningful international experiences.

Last year, virtual exchange exposed young people to a range of cultures, languages, and viewpoints, expanding their understanding of the world and fostering global competence. By engaging with peers from different backgrounds, participants developed empathy, respect, and appreciation for cultural diversity. The highlights of our 2024 program evaluation demonstrate consistent positive changes in multiple global competencies for participants of Stevens Initiative-supported virtual exchanges.



**77% of participants** have more confidence in their ability to have an impact in their home country.



**89% of participants** reported an increase in soft skills – such as communication and self-confidence – because of their program participation.



**95% of participants** reported that their program offered opportunities to engage with other cultures.





# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROMOTES LANGUAGE LEARNING.

There are many benefits to learning a new language: improved cognitive ability, problem-solving skills, and memory. Being multilingual pays off — literally. Analysis by Preply found that 40% of multilingual employees said their language skills helped them land a job and earn 19% more than their single-language counterparts. Knowing more than one language is a necessary skill for anyone who wants to compete in the workforce and thrive in our world. This year, we supported several virtual exchange programs that enabled young people to hone their language learning skills in authentic, real-world contexts.

An example of a multilingual virtual exchange is Global Nomads Group's Overcoming Bias Through Language Learning. This program empowers middle and high school aged youth to identify personal, societal, and linguistic biases as well as strengthen their respective language skills.



**During the Global Nomads experience, my 10th grade students applied their language skills in real-world contexts by participating in conversations, presentations, and collaborative projects with peers. They used English to discuss cultural differences, solve problems, and share personal experiences. This allowed them to communicate beyond the classroom and engage in meaningful dialogue.**

**Through their participation, their speaking and writing skills improved significantly. They became more confident in expressing ideas, asking questions, and offering feedback in English. Writing activities, such as shared blogs or group reports, enhanced their ability to structure and present their thoughts clearly.**

**My students also gained valuable insights into the lifestyles, beliefs, and values of their counterparts. This exposure broadened their perspectives, fostering a greater sense of empathy and openness. It also challenged stereotypes they might have had before.**

**I believe this experience will have lasting effects, inspiring a deeper interest in language learning and motivating them to continue using English in diverse, authentic situations.**

— Yleana Yanine Hernandez, Educator, Christel House Mexico



# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE CREATES NEW OPPORTUNITIES.

Virtual exchange is a key that opens the door to new, and sometimes unexpected, opportunities for our alumni. Participating in a virtual exchange demonstrates a commitment to personal and professional growth. Participants are often eager learners who seek out opportunities for continued development, from internships and career opportunities to advocacy in their communities.

To learn more about the different pathways to success virtual exchange affords, we asked our alumni what they've been up to in 2024!



**49.6%** OF ALUMNI  
received job  
opportunities.



**66.2%** OF ALUMNI  
paid it forward by  
participating in  
community-based  
projects or initiatives.



**83%** OF ALUMNI  
pursued professional  
development activities,  
including public speaking  
engagements, contributions  
to publications, or  
participation in a mentorship  
or fellowship program.



**Through virtual exchange, I honed my leadership and cross-cultural communication skills, enabling me to effectively lead international teams. This experience has broadened my perspective, influenced my goals, and underscored the importance of engaging with global markets. Going international is no longer optional; it's essential, and virtual tools make it seamless.**

— Sana Hammad, Jordan, IREX's Global Solutions Conversations



**58% OF ALUMNI**  
enrolled in further education, such as a higher education institution.



**60% OF ALUMNI**  
expanded their international horizons through studying, traveling, or living abroad.



**70% OF ALUMNI**  
continued their virtual exchange journey as a participant or facilitator of another program.

Data reflects results collected from a Stevens Initiative survey of a subset of alumni in July 2024.



**My experience in Global Ties U.S.'s Empowering Resilient Girls Exchange was the first time I ever really learned how to take care of my mental health. The conversation around this continues to be stigmatized in the U.S. and MENA, but the opportunity to break down those barriers with others was a unifying and empowering experience. It actually inspired me to work with my state senator to introduce a bill that expanded mental health education in New Hampshire.**

— Loreley Godfrey, New Hampshire, U.S., Global Ties U.S.'s MENA-US Empowering Resilient Girls Exchange



# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE EMPOWERS YOUNG PEOPLE TO TAKE CLIMATE ACTION.

Virtual exchange is a tool for young people to work on the global challenges that matter most to them, such as sustainability and the climate crisis. This creates a generation of young people whose understanding of the world is broadened by building meaningful relationships with people from different cultures and who bring the capacity and enthusiasm to solve problems across continents. In 2024, we supported 16 virtual exchange programs designed to address climate and sustainability. Continue reading to learn about select programs and the projects young participants are working on!

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**The International Foundation for Training and Development and the Onslow County School District's Youth for Sustainable Development Goals Virtual Exchange** engaged high school students from Morocco and North Carolina in learning about the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Participants co-created projects that reflected their chosen SDG and proposed solutions for achieving it, culminating in a digital showcase. Participants in the spring 2024 cohort created collaborative posters, drawings, and short stories that addressed social justice and building inclusive societies.



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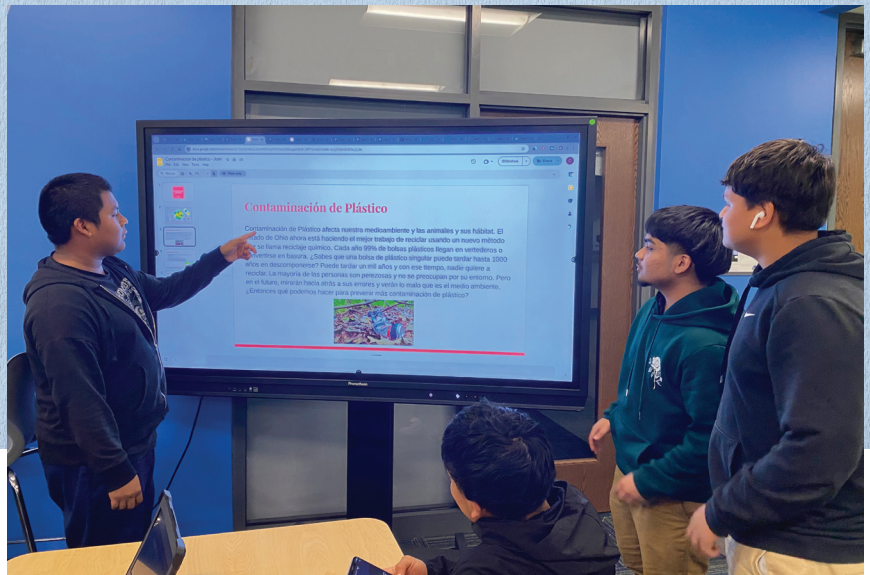
**IREX's Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge** is an eight-week virtual competition where participants develop and pitch business concepts addressing UN SDGs while enhancing workforce and global citizenship skills. The top teams present their pitches at the Virtual Global Business Expo, where judges award a grant to the winning concepts. Spring 2024 winners from Florida and Jordan created a subscription-based smart compost service for converting food waste into high-quality compost and fertilizers.



**An-Najah National University's Climate Futures Exchange** blends emerging technology with green architecture to challenge American and Palestinian college students to create innovative solutions addressing climate issues. Participants work together to analyze existing climate challenges, explore built environment case studies, and present their solutions in a culminating design competition. In the 2024 competition, participants designed a sustainable kindergarten in Maajin, Nablus. It is characterized by climate change mitigation strategies and a comfortable environment for children despite the difficult climate conditions, with high energy efficiency.



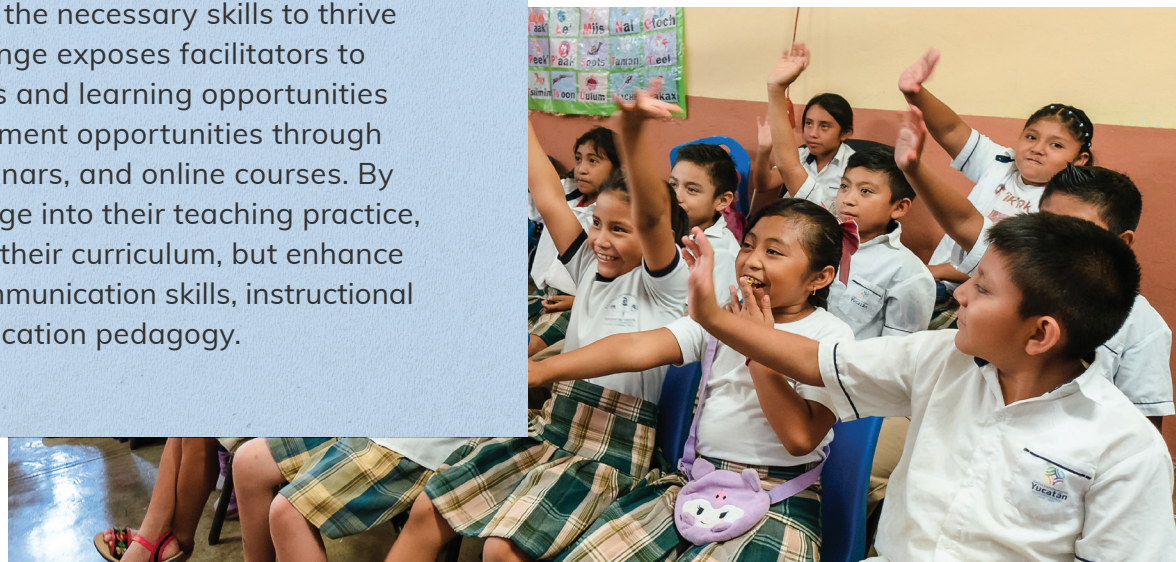
**iEARN USA's Compañeros de Clase Globales** brings together participants from Guatemala and the U.S. to engage in SustainBEEs, a project designed to raise environmental awareness among young people at the elementary and middle school levels. Students collaborate in groups to identify local problems related to the UN SDGs, conduct online research, attend field trips, and meet with experts to take collaborative action on the issues of their choosing.

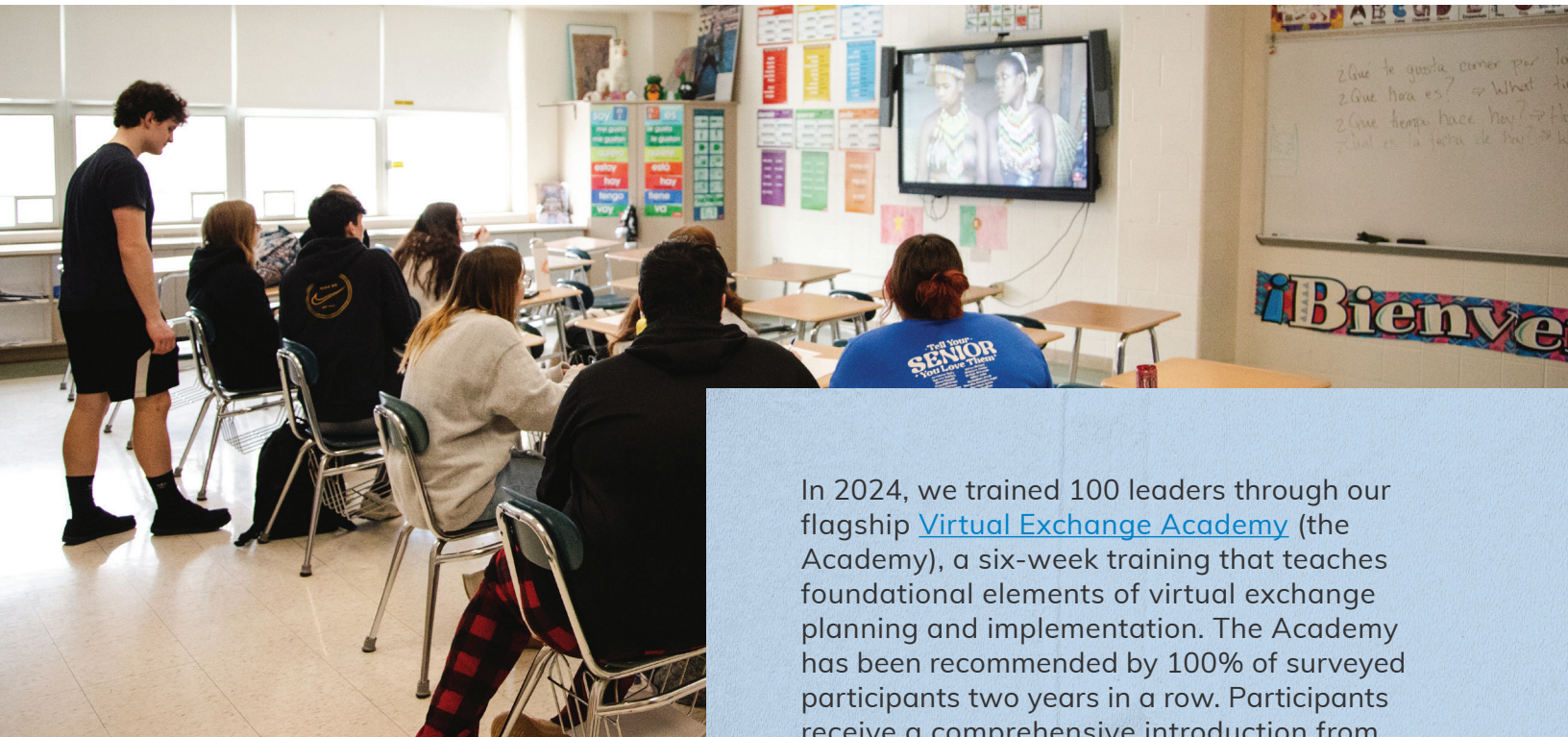


# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE INSPIRES LIFELONG LEARNING.



We believe that to create better outcomes for young people, we must also support and empower educators and facilitators. Lifelong learning is an essential part of personal and professional development that provides the global workforce with the necessary skills to thrive in any field. Virtual exchange exposes facilitators to international relationships and learning opportunities and offers global development opportunities through training, workshops, webinars, and online courses. By integrating virtual exchange into their teaching practice, educators not only enrich their curriculum, but enhance their own intercultural communication skills, instructional strategies, and global education pedagogy.





In 2024, we trained 100 leaders through our flagship [Virtual Exchange Academy](#) (the Academy), a six-week training that teaches foundational elements of virtual exchange planning and implementation. The Academy has been recommended by 100% of surveyed participants two years in a row. Participants receive a comprehensive introduction from leaders in the field who prepare them to adopt virtual exchange as a powerful tool for connection and collaboration.

We also launched our [Training Hub](#) to drive continued growth of virtual exchange programs. This curated collection of more than 40 capacity-building offerings is designed for educators, administrators, and education and exchange leaders reaching young people to easily navigate training opportunities from individuals and organizations in the field.



### **How did participating in the Virtual Exchange Academy prepare you to bring virtual exchange to your community?**

The whole Academy experience models what a good virtual exchange should look like – from icebreakers to being able to connect with people from all over the world. The activities we do and technology we use during the exchange were modeled during the Academy. I knew how powerful these sessions were to me, so I was constantly thinking about how I could make this happen in my own class. It all made me that much more excited to start my own virtual exchange!

### **What continues to drive your passion for this global learning tool?**

Seeing what virtual exchange has done for students continues to drive me. I see how they've been more engaged in class activities because they really see a purpose for what they're learning. They're putting it into action, and it's incredible to give them that perspective-changing experience. I believe virtual exchanges are the next big thing in delivering quality education. There are so many young people who don't have the ability or means to travel, and this is giving them opportunities for global experiences.

### **How does virtual exchange promote growth and transformation for not just young people, but also for educators?**

I saw my students go through a virtual exchange with Colombian peers and saw their perceptions change, which was really rewarding for me. I think we need to develop that curiosity a lot more in young people, and virtual exchange helps us do that. I also noticed my students develop more pride in our school, community, and culture.

### **How have you applied lessons learned from virtual exchange in your own teaching or professional development?**

Virtual exchange has improved my teaching so much. I have learned about different cultures and school systems, which has opened my eyes and made my teaching better. Doing the virtual exchange activities also prompted me to think about my teaching in a different way. It made my students immediately put to work the concepts and skills I teach them. It made the curriculum more applicable, and students were a lot more interested in learning how to do certain things. For example, my students asked me, "How do I say this?" or "How do we do this?" which showed me that they wanted to use their Spanish in a real-world way.



# MEET

## **Jodi Resch Brownell**

*Spanish Educator, Crandon High School and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's 2023-24 Global Educator of the Year*



# 2025 GOALS

Looking ahead to our ten-year anniversary in 2025, we will draw on a decade of engagement, oversight, and capacity-building for programs to accelerate the reach and impact of virtual exchange. We will build capacity, foster innovation, and catalyze transformative field growth through strategic partnerships with organizations that span diverse sectors and share in our mission to advance and empower young people.

We want to reach more young people than ever before, but [we can't do it without you](#).

## Join a Program

Individual educators, entire educational institutions, or nonprofit organizations can incorporate virtual exchange into classrooms and extracurricular settings by implementing an existing program.



## Mobilize Youth Participation

Educators, youth organizers, and administrators can share open enrollment opportunities with young people to participate in virtual exchange on their own time, often from home



## Train for Virtual Exchange

The Stevens Initiative provides capacity-building opportunities to educators, administrators, and education and exchange leaders reaching young people of all ages around the world.



## Strategic Partnerships

We collaborate with organizations across sectors and industries to help make virtual exchange an option for every young person around the world.



# Thank You to Our Community

- Bezos Family Foundation
- U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
- Government of the United Arab Emirates
- Government of Morocco
- AFS Intercultural Programs
- Amideast
- An-Najah National University
- Arizona State University
- Culturingua
- Digital Promise
- Educación para Compartir
- Education for Employment
- Florida International University
- Georgia State University Research Foundation
- Global Nomads Group
- Global Ties KC
- iEARN-USA
- Institute of International Education
- International Foundation for Training and Development
- IREX
- MapWorks Learning
- Marshall Legacy Institute
- Mexican Association for International Education
- Miami Dade College
- Millennium Campus Network
- Missouri State University
- PATHWAYS Institute for Negotiation Education
- PeacePlayers International
- Plugged in Band Program
- Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education
- Seattle University School of Law
- Shenandoah University
- Smithsonian Science Education Center
- Special Olympics International
- Soliya
- Take Action Global
- Teens of Color Abroad
- Texas International Education Consortium
- The New York Academy of Sciences
- United Planet
- University of Florida
- William Davidson Institute at The University of Michigan
- World Learning



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