

The Berkeley Schools Excellence Program (BSEP) provides significant support for the academic and enrichment programs in Berkeley's Public Schools. On September 30, 2015, some of the core components of the current BSEP Measure were described under the rubric of "Essentials for Excellence." Those components included Class Size Reduction, Libraries, Technology, Music, Expanded Course Offerings and Site Discretionary Funds. In addition to these essential resources, the generous investment and continued commitment of our community to our schools through BSEP has enabled our district to provide specific supports and services to our students and families. BSEP-funded resources for Parent Outreach, Public Information, and Middle School Counseling are providing opportunities for engagement and support of families as well as students. Those resources are also ensuring that our District communicates openly and accessibly with the community that it serves, and that the social and emotional barriers that often interfere with student progress in the academic environment are being addressed.

Parent Outreach and Family Engagement

The Office of Family Engagement and Equity for Berkeley's Public Schools was initially funded by BSEP, and now has an expanded program jointly funded by BSEP and the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), providing staffing for the equivalent of eight full-time employees to provide services, support, and to build relationships with families across the district. Berkeley's model of family engagement honors the notion of parents being absolutely critical to the development and progress of children in our schools. Family Engagement staff works to support all families, and makes a pointed effort to engage families who have historically not been as visible in the school community, most notably lower income families, families of English learners, and families of color.

Our family engagement staff at all K-5 sites as well as Berkeley High School, makes regular efforts to connect with community leaders and other community resources outside of the school in order to align a variety of social and health supports to the families of students who may be at risk of not being successful at school. Our family engagement staff is cognizant of the evolving understanding of what constitutes a family, and therefore is mindful to extend their efforts to all guardians, grandparents, foster parents, fathers, single parents, blended families, and families made up of two moms or two dads.

On a daily basis, these BSEP-funded coordinators review daily attendance, and follow up with the families of truant and chronically absent students. They connect and interact with focal students in classrooms, lunchrooms, and on the playgrounds. They follow up on specific student or family needs that are determined through ongoing district processes such as the Coordination of Services Teams (COST), as well as more formal attendance structures such as the Student Attendance Review Team (SART) and the Student Attendance Review Boards (SARB).

Weekly tasks for the liaisons include their attendance as advocates for focus students and families at the Coordination of Services Team Meetings. They also attend PTA meetings and/or

School Governance Council Meetings, as well as a variety of other meetings focused on student supports or resource decisions. More intermittent and broader tasks throughout the year include planning events and/or consulting on planned school events to ensure that these events are inclusive and that extra outreach is made to harder to reach families. The coordinators also plan and coordinate informational events for families around curriculum instruction and major school events.

Moving forward, these events will be used to expand our district's opportunities to inform all families all families of the academic skills and knowledge goals for children at each grade level. This helps ensure that clear annual learning objectives and outcomes are communicated to students and their families in a clear and consistent manner. Family engagement staff and the parent engagement coordinators also provide assistance to a variety of long standing or newly formed parent groups, including planning, advertising, and even facilitating meetings.

Philosophically, the office of Family Engagement and Equity for Berkeley Unified seeks to rethink traditional assumptions about parent engagement and the role of parents in the educational experience of their kids. Leaning on the work of the Teaching for Change project, a non-profit organization that has developed extensive tools for teachers and schools to address issues of social change, our BSEP-supported model has been moving in new directions relative to traditional frameworks and structures for family engagement. While many traditional structures for parent involvement or family engagement still have a useful place within the overall school community, the traditional conceptions of parental roles being limited to fundraising, chaperoning, or attending PTA meetings are evolving toward a model where families and school staff together find meaningful ways for parents to be involved. These newer models, embraced by our schools, envision multiple roles for parents that include supporting teaching and learning, acting as advocates and decision-makers, as well as being both ambassadors for and monitors of the overall school program (Teaching for Change 2015).

The District has, since April of 2012, developed its model for family engagement with the following research and literature in mind: The California Department of Education's "Family Engagement Framework", Joyce Epstein's work at Johns Hopkins on various types and models of parent involvement, and the work of Anne T. Henderson, including her book, "Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family/ School Partnerships."

Our family engagement staff is committed to a basic but sometimes overlooked premise that parents have the capacity to support success in school for their children regardless of their socioeconomic or educational status. Traditional assumptions in many school settings have assumed a deficit perspective of parents who lack higher levels of education or who have historically not been as visible on the school campus as others. The family engagement model in Berkeley's public schools turns away from the deficit model to recognize and cultivate the knowledge and strength of each family, as we firmly believe that there is a role in schools for all families, and the potential for great contribution to the educational experience for all kids from each and every member of our current community.

Very often parents without formal education backgrounds or significant economic means can be our most effective allies when addressing the needs of struggling students, bringing their knowledge of family dynamics and neighborhood histories to underpin a capacity to engage their own students and other students because of deeper relationships within the community.

Historical models of family engagement have often and in admittedly ineffective incarnations assumed that the school always knows best and is solely responsible for decision-making and then is responsible for passing that knowledge and those decisions on to the family. A more fully realized approach to family engagement, and one our staff is currently facilitating, recognizes that everyone has valuable knowledge, and often the parents or families without economic status or formal education bring the most localized and relevant knowledge to our decision-making. A continued effort in this area supports genuinely collaborative and inclusive decision-making; a model that is frequently more beneficial and effective than a one-way flow of knowledge and decisions from school staff to families, or worse, from school staff to a select and static group of families already sufficiently engaged.

This approach does not fail to recognize the genuine economic and life-related barriers and challenges that often prevent some parents from being as visible or as consistently engaged at school sites as others. The overall understanding needs to continue to shift away from the assumption that parents who are not as visible, and who may not be able to be as visible for variety of reasons, are not wanting, willing, or actively contributing to the education of their children. Work schedules, family obligations, economic status, and impacts related to all three may prevent large numbers of families from being as visible or involved as families with greater means often can.

It is therefore the intention of our family engagement efforts, and our school district as a whole, to ensure that we are regularly considering new ways, whether through technology, through flexible meeting times, increased communication, or through more personalized outreach, to engage more with the families whom we see less. With a renewed focus on increasing contacts with families last year, family engagement staff generated a significant increase in the number of contacts made to families between the 13-14 and 14-15 school years.

A separate attachment providing additional information and data relevant to the work of our family engagement staff will be included in a presentation by the Office of Family Engagement and Equity on October 14, 2015. That information was procured as part of the evaluation process for the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), which jointly funds family engagement staffing along with BSEP in Berkeley's public Schools.

Middle School Counseling

With much of the focus of ongoing discussions on school improvement rightfully focused on teaching quality and curriculum, the role and importance of school counselors is often overlooked. Having long moved past narrow definitions of counselors as those who simply make

schedule changes, the numerous ways in which contemporary school counselors support students and families in their academic efforts are more than apparent and make their roles and functions crucial.

A reconceptualized role for middle school counselors, or school counselors in general, one that Berkeley's public schools do embrace, includes a role wherein counselors provide direct service for students and small groups of students, work collaboratively with teachers and parents, and build connections between students and broader services and supports within the school and community as a means of making contributions to the achievement of all students (Beale 2013).

As with other key investments within the BSEP measure, the counseling resources provided through a component of the BSEP Class Size Reduction Fund is another demonstration of how this community contribution allows our schools to go beyond the minimum staffing that may be the norm in many districts and at many schools; that contribution moves our programs and school communities closer to the optimal levels of student support and service necessary to achieve wider student success.

Counselors are in the best position to assess barriers to academic success because they work collaboratively with teachers, administrators, and parents to devise ways to identify and remove obstacles to students' success (Kaplan & Evans, 1999). Counselors, via the relationships they are able to cultivate, and the deepened understandings of circumstances that they are able to accumulate, frequently support kids and help them navigate their academic paths in the face of custody disputes, interpersonal or family crises, unplanned pregnancy, bullying situations, or serious behavioral health challenges that yield a host of risks ranging from depression to the contemplation of suicide.

Our counselors become familiar with the evolving dynamics and structure of families, of single-parent families, blended families, foster and adoptive families, and nonparent caretakers. Our counselors are tasked with both providing general guidance to all students around an array of academic and school-based issues, and are also asked to be available to counsel students on "highly personal matters and individualized choices, often fraught with challenge and complexity due to family, cultural, and contextual considerations (Elias 2010).

With BSEP's ongoing support, Berkeley's middle school programs include two counselors at Willard, two at Longfellow, and three at King. As critical as this resource is for students, our teachers and families also benefit greatly from the presence and work of counselors. As early as middle school, counselors can support parents in developing their child's long-range learning plans, provide support for parents in advocating for their child, increase opportunities for parent/school interaction, and facilitate greater parent access to school and community resources. Counselors are a great resource for teachers as well, as they are often part of interdisciplinary team efforts to address student needs and educational goals, and can provide consultation and specific insights on student needs to their teacher colleagues.

Public Information, Translation, and Community Engagement

Multiple communication channels are needed to reach diverse audiences, including parents, students, employees, and community stakeholders, each with distinct interests and concerns. In order to improve the ways the District engages and communicates with families and the community, a strategic communications planning process began in 2011. The resulting Communications Plan has led to more consistent attention and skills directed toward both internal and external audiences. The improved district publications and communications include a redesigned district website with frequently updated content and an issue-driven blog, more translated material both in print and online, a focus on top content areas, and the formation of the Superintendent's Communications Team to focus on improving the flow of information to and from school sites, families, and the wider community. The Communications Team includes the Supervisor of the Office of Family Engagement, the District Translation Specialist, the Director of Technology, the Public Information Officer and the BSEP Director, who each bring expertise in using a wide range of communications channels to reach diverse audiences. The rapid evolution of options for communication has required the team to constantly review and adapt to the use of new media and the changing landscape for communications. Each time an opportunity for public information or community engagement is considered, the team must consider the appropriate vehicle for the interaction and whether a special focus is needed for any targeted subgroups and whether translation and interpretation is needed. Communications channels may include mail, email, texting, phone blasts, social media, news media, website information, online surveys or polls, and smaller and larger public meetings. Each modality requires differing considerations to ensure that the messages and/or forum is adapted to each situation and group, as there is no "one size fits all" approach to communication and community engagement.

Translation/Interpretation

The BSEP public information resource provides additional support for the District's non-English speaking families to improve understanding of and access to programs and services. A Specialist Translator/Interpreter provides Spanish translation for key District materials, supplemented by hourly translator/interpreters when needed. In addition, a contract with a multilingual Language Line telephone service provides instant access to simultaneous interpretation, such as for parent conferences, with requests in the past year including Arabic, Cantonese, Farsi, Mandarin, Spanish, Hakka, Tongan, Japanese and Turkish. The linguistic diversity in the District continues to evolve. Spanish is the highest need, with over 8% of our population classified as Spanish-speaking English learners; that number is concentrated in particular at two schools (LeConte and Thousand Oaks) where the Spanish-speaking population is 12 to 20%. There are also significant numbers of speakers of languages of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, including Arabic, French, and Urdu. Ten years ago, the top languages after Spanish were Cantonese and Vietnamese, so there are significant demographic shifts taking place in a short time frame. One of the greatest challenges and expenses for translation/interpretation occurs when a non-English speaking or bilingual child needs an assessment, as for an IEP, and/or a parent needs access to understanding a complex report. It should be emphasized that simply providing translation or interpretation, whether in Spanish or

other language, is just a first step in ensuring that a parent or guardian is able to access the information they need. Here again the Office of Family Engagement, together with the Translation Specialist, can provide insight as to the cultural issues that may provide either barriers or entryways to parent/family engagement.

Community Engagement and Public Oversight

Just as student achievement and well-being is supported through a focus on family engagement, student counseling, and access to information, the overall health of the school and district is improved through the informed involvement of parents, guardians and community members in local decision-making. The BSEP Office supports the development of School Governance Councils (SGCs) at each school, as well as the District Planning and Oversight (P&O) Committee, through outreach, elections, training and ongoing support for decision-making. These committees not only ensure public stewardship of the BSEP funds, they also provide meaningful opportunities for parents/ guardians, staff and students to work together to focus resources on high priority programs. The BSEP office works with program managers and committee members in the strategic development and financial oversight of BSEP funded programs, while also ensuring the Berkeley community is aware of the benefits that their tax dollars and support are bringing to students throughout the district. The support for community engagement extends beyond the SGCs and P&O Committee to include support for the LCAP process and the Parent Advisory Committee, as well as the District English Learner Advisory Committees, PTAs, affinity groups, district staff and community partners to support inclusive and effective processes across the district. A continued challenge is to make the complex budgetary and programmatic decisions more accessible to our community members so that their input is not just a pro forma opportunity but a meaningful, inclusive, informed and effective interaction.

Conclusion

In addition to the essential resources BSEP provides for our educational programs, this community has made a crucial investment in providing supports and services for our students and families. Our efforts to provide clear and accessible communication to all families as well as the counseling resources that help students and families navigate the vast variety of obstacles that can interfere with the pursuit academic success, exist in large part because our community has, through BSEP, aligned its resources with a common set of beliefs and values where public education is concerned. With specific and intentional efforts directed toward deeper engagement of all families, and most notably toward families who have often been historically underrepresented or less visible in our school communities, we can create schools that are accessible and welcoming to all, where the perspectives and potential contributions of all students and families are honored, and every student is seen and valued.

Works Cited

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