

Berkeley Public Schools

Providing the Essentials for Educational Excellence

Understanding or *defining* the “purpose” of a K-12 education has rightfully been the subject of impassioned and spirited discussion and debate between educators, policymakers, communities, and families. Statements of educational purpose over time and in a variety of social and cultural contexts, have included intellectual and creative development, essential skill building, self-realization, service of social needs, and the ability to contribute to and benefit from an economic system; to create an effective workforce, to stimulate creative and problem-solving processes, and to develop character as well as the consciousness of and respect for community that allows for full participation in a democracy.

As wide-ranging as these notions of education are, and as challenging as balancing and harmonizing them within schools and school systems are, their synthesis is critical if the educational experiences we design for children and young people are to be both engaging and also serve as relevant and effective preparation for the vast cross section of human experience that awaits them in adulthood. While we remain mindful of the long-term economic and employment benefits of a world class K-12 experience, at least insofar as it serves as the springboard to a variety of post-secondary educational opportunities, the Berkeley Public Schools also seek to endow students with what writer Peter Capelli calls “the actual merits of a traditional, broad-based education.” An education that can “enrich your life and provide lessons that extend beyond any individual job.” (Cassidy 2015).

It then follows that supporting and sustaining a quality, dynamic, and broad-based educational and instructional program, one that is up to integrating the aforementioned aims and complexities, requires a substantial and sustained partnership. This partnership is one wherein our educators, those who hold our learning spaces daily, and who fuel and facilitate growth for kids through the design of thoughtful and creative learning opportunities, are met with a substantial community investment. Our community has, most notably, supported this vision of partnership through the Berkeley Schools Excellence Program (BSEP). As a community response to school funding shortages in the wake of Proposition 13, the Berkeley Schools Excellence Project (BSEP) has made a significant difference in the quality of our children’s education since

1986, restoring to the Berkeley schools the capacity to support an instructional program that has integrated the pursuit of strong foundational skills with essential opportunities for all kids to innovate, create, and collaborate with one another, and to ensure a more equitable access to such opportunities for all.

Consider just a few of the benefits our schools have enjoyed over time through consistent community support from BSEP...

- Our students check out over 1,000 library books every day;
- Our students play 3,200 musical instruments each week;
- Our students and teachers have support for wifi in every school and Chromebooks for interactive and online educational tools
- Our class sizes are smaller than statewide averages, with nearly 1/3 of our teachers provided by BSEP.

BSEP's community-based fiscal support has helped Berkeley's public schools avoid the difficult decisions many districts have faced: between funding what have traditionally been understood as core academics, the proverbial reading, writing, and arithmetic, and funding "enrichment" programs like music and the arts. The support of the Berkeley Schools Excellence Program (BSEP) has allowed our schools to maintain a balance of these components within our comprehensive educational program. Our district believes that the arts, technology, and the numerous other endeavors often labeled as "extras" or "extracurricular" are not in fact extras but rather *essentials*, and warrant a prominent place in the daily educational experiences of our students.

Our educational programs also obviously recognize the critical importance of acquiring foundational skills, the basic fluencies in reading, written and oral communication, and mathematics that are essential to both accessing and making optimal use of opportunities to engage in higher order thinking, creative expression, and more complex problem-solving. As author and mathematics professor Jordan Ellenberg opines, "When doing any serious mathematical thinking, you're going to have to multiply 6 by 8 sometimes, and if you have to reach for your calculator every time you do that, you'll never achieve the kind of mental flow that actual mathematical thinking requires; moreover, you can't write a sonnet if you have to look up the spelling of each word as you go" (Ellenberg 2014).

Support for Our Teachers

Alongside support for programs and curriculum, the BSEP Measure's resources also provide support for the professional learning infrastructure that develops, and builds new capacity for our teachers in a way that is absent in many school systems. Our teachers must continually be provided with opportunities to refine and enrich their practices, and to learn from one another as they approach one of the more complex and important professional and social undertakings in any community. BSEP's contribution to professional learning has expanded opportunities for teaching professionals to facilitate learning, inspire kids, and respond to the changing world in which their students live and learn.

BSEPs support of professional development provides teachers with effective tools to meet district expectations in areas ranging from academic writing instruction, the transition to common core mathematics, and strategies for managing cultural differences in the classroom. Additionally, our professional learning programs have supported collaboration between teachers to share best practices in classroom management, integrating technology in the classroom, or supporting English language learners as well as facilitating the full inclusion of students with special needs and learning challenges in our classrooms. This model of professional learning is moving toward an optimal but very rare model for teachers, one that supports broader district goals and also differentiates for educators in a way that we so often suggest that they do for kids but rarely in turn do for them.

The broad-based educational program we strive to maintain in Berkeley's schools requires an ongoing investment in both our students and teachers, as well as some crucial aspects of our current program that support that vision; namely, balanced class sizes, expansive and inclusive access to the visual and performing arts, an evolving role for school libraries and classroom technology, as well as a commitment to provide some critical discretion and flexibility to staff and parent groups with regard to resources and program at individual school sites.

In the following pages we have attempted to summarize some of the essentials of an educational program for all kids that, above all, fosters an affinity and aptitude for the process of learning itself. “A student who has learned to love the process of learning will never be redundant,” notes writer Sarah Green. “It’s the one skill that will serve us best in an economy that is uncertain, a world that is volatile, and a future that is anything but predictable.” While the specific skills students may need in 2030 or even 2020 may be harder to forecast than we would like to think, if we have endowed students with a love of learning itself, we will have substantially increased the probability that they will acquire, or have the *ability* to acquire, whatever skills prove most relevant to their communities and careers moving forward (Green 2012). It is precisely this type of overall outcome that BSEP helps us facilitate through its ongoing support of critical components of our educational program.

Class Size

Since the first BSEP Measure of 1986, the Berkeley community has supported the District’s ability to maintain class sizes that are lower than most other public schools across the state. The most widely known and well respected study on the matter, Tennessee’s Student Teacher Assessment Ratio (STAR) experiment, as well as the qualitative responses of classroom teachers, point to the benefits of smaller class sizes (Schanzenbach 2014).

In the STAR experiment, which was unusual in both its statewide scale and the randomized, experiment group versus control group design, teachers in the study found that, with smaller classes, they were able to use a wider range of strategies to promote learning. For example, teachers are better able to closely and consistently monitor the progress of student learning, are able to re-teach using alternative strategies when children do not learn a concept, can more easily widen daily participation in whole-class discussions, can maintain consistent and more substantive personal interactions with their students, are better able to tailor instruction to the needs of individual kids or small groups of students, and ultimately are better able to more thoughtfully review, assess, and respond to student work. Smaller class sizes provide teachers with the opportunity for increased attentiveness, responsiveness and flexibility, and in turn facilitate a deeper and more consistent level of student engagement. These simple but profound interpersonal and pedagogical relationships reveal how smaller class size, in combination with well designed instruction and curriculum, can contribute to greater student growth and success (Schanzenbach 2014).

While reduced class size is not the only means of generating student growth, the *resource* of reduced class size establishes an essential foundational structure, which, together with other key components of an optimized educational program, can underpin an outstanding educational experience for kids. As the resource of smaller class size connects to thoughtfully designed curriculum delivered by teachers who are skilled and creative facilitators, and where those smaller classes are provided with access to appropriate technologies, as well as learning experiences in science, visual and performing arts, and a host of other enriching curricular essentials, the intellectual and creative growth for all of our kids becomes a more achievable goal and a more probable outcome.

The smaller class sizes Berkeley has maintained for its students through BSEP funding has allowed BUSD to be one of the few districts in California that could qualify for full state Class Size Reduction funding at the 20:1 level K-3, yet this has not been a simple matter of funding and multiple factors present challenges to always meeting the exact targeted class sizes. When this issue was reviewed prior to the BSEP Measure of 2006, the recommendation was to maintain class sizes at 20:1 in K-3 and 26:1 in 4th and 5th grades, noting several complexities including the need for a sufficient number of classrooms to house smaller classes, and the mathematical difficulty of transitioning from classes of 20 in 3rd grade to 26 in 4th grade, especially in small schools, which often necessitates split grade classes or larger class sizes.

With the 2016 measure, the class size decision will be made in a somewhat changed context; the state has shifted its class size goal from 20:1 district-wide K-3 to 24:1 K-3 as a school-wide average, and the designated allocation for the state class size reduction funding has been reduced, necessitating a greater commitment from the general fund to maintain class sizes below 24:1. Meanwhile, enrollment growth in the district has put a premium on classroom and “flex” space availability, and the jump from 20:1 to 26:1 in the elementary grades has continued to necessitate split grade classrooms or larger class sizes in some cases, neither of which have not been well received by all school communities. With planning for the next measure, our class size reduction goals, and our thinking about optimal class sizes, will require increased consideration of state funding changes, enrollment growth, long-term analysis of our facilities, teacher prep time and use thereof, as well as the thoughtful balancing of class sizes K-5.

Music and the Visual and Performing Arts

A continuing contribution that BSEP makes to Berkeley public schools, and one that has deepened both the educational experience and benefit for many of our students, is the ongoing presence and integration of music and the visual and performing arts into our core curriculum. Berkeley's Public Schools value the deeper educational and learning value that the visual and performing arts bring to the learning experience, and again see them as neither extras nor enrichments but as *essentials*. The ongoing community contribution through BSEP over the years has allowed our schools to restore and maintain arts and music programs that have been eliminated in districts which lack the public resources or the vision to go beyond narrower opportunities for students. While our schools sustain our investment in the arts in the coming years, it will be necessary to continue to broaden both the cultural diversity of our arts programs and expand access to the arts at all levels of our K-12 progression.

The intrinsic benefits of cumulative experiences in the arts for kids are abundant. Through the immediate pleasures and benefits of the creative process, as well as through experiencing the creativity or creative expressions of others, the arts can enhance empathy and understanding, the powers of observation, and foster connections within a pluralistic society in a way that few other endeavors can. The social bonds and wider understanding that can be created among individuals through the reflection, discourse, and expressions of common values and community identity arts endeavors often inspire, makes them indispensable as both learning tools and as pathways to develop more thoughtful and creative citizens.

While the intrinsic value of arts experiences are clear, there is also notable evidence that music and the arts are also worthy of being essential components of the curriculum for the way they develop skills that apply beyond the boundaries of traditional creative expression. Music alone has repeatedly shown quantifiable benefits for kids when it comes to language processing and verbal skills, larger growth of neural activity at younger ages, as well as contributions to improved sound discrimination and fine motor skills. Additionally, research has found demonstrable links between music and spatial and temporal skills; skills necessary in the

multi-step processes or problems one might encounter in architecture, art, mathematics, engineering, or computer science (Lewis-Brown 2013).

Schools that embed creative processes into the educational experiences they design and facilitate for kids, both through music and a wider range of visual and performing arts, are in fact supporting what are increasingly believed to be vital areas of preparation relative to career readiness and workforce preparedness. Reports like the 2008 *Ready to Innovate* by the non-profit Conference Board, as well as a comparable 2006 report by the *New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, confirm that *creativity*, often evoked and taught most effectively through the arts, is among the top applied skills sought by employers. Moreover, that a high level of preparation that includes the arts will be “an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce” given that our kids are preparing for a world in which “comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job,” and in which “creativity and innovation are increasingly the keys to the good life” (Conference Board 2008).

Technology and Libraries

Instructional Technology

The increasing presence of technology in the classroom presents educators with expanded instructional opportunities, while also providing students with new opportunities to engage with subject matter and demonstrate proficiency or mastery of that content. The current measure provides support for 6.2 FTE of computer technicians who are the chief “fixers” of classroom technology, as well as a small amount for materials at schools. Additionally, the Professional Development section of the measure provides 1.0 FTE for a TSA for Instructional Technology.

Berkeley’s public schools continue to increasingly integrate technology into our classrooms in order for teachers and students to take full advantage of technology tools that support creative teaching and enhance learning. Our educators, however, understand that technology simply enhances or accelerates good pedagogy. Kentaro Toyama, writing in a recent piece in the *Atlantic Monthly*, notes that, “Technology’s primary effect is to amplify human forces, so in education, technologies amplify whatever pedagogical capacity is already there” (Toyama 2015).

In Berkeley's Public Schools we are committed to ensuring that the integration of technology follows a concurrent investment in professional learning and support for teachers so that the contexts in which students utilize and apply technology, and the objectives or outcomes they pursue *with technology*, have sound and creative teaching strategies and lesson design as their foundations. Without such pedagogical considerations, we run the risk of ignoring technology's true potential as a learning tool, and relegate it to helping students simply digitize lower level cognitive expressions like summaries, paraphrased information, and descriptions and explanations. Instructional technology provides opportunities to boost well designed lesson plans that creatively utilize everything from interactive video conferences, multimedia and multidisciplinary productions, mobile applications, and smart uses of social media platforms to design and invent, evaluate and debate, and altogether spend more of their educational experiences immersed in the upper registers of cognitive challenge.

Libraries

Our library educators, present at staffing levels that many districts would envy thanks to BSEP, continue to celebrate and encourage the pleasures of reading with kids, and while that might appear an obvious responsibility, sometimes, given the understandable urgency or pressures to push a student to read to improve fluency or for academic purposes, an emphasis on the pleasures of reading and of enjoying stories can get a bit lost, and while our librarians certainly support our core instructional initiatives, they also help preserve reading for pleasure as a dimension of our students' educational experiences.

Our print collection has expanded with attention to the "We Need Diverse Books" national campaign which we in Berkeley had embarked upon long before the national effort emerged, providing students with "mirrors and windows" into their own experiences and those of the diverse student body around them.

Our library collections are now fully online and accessible from any computer, and include print and digital content, e-books, as well as research databases at the secondary level, most notably in our high school. All BUSD Library content is now accessible from home or anywhere, and our

library websites link directly to the Berkeley Public Library on our websites and allow kids to access materials we might not have in our school libraries.

In an era when so many students have the potential to carry a global library on a device in their pockets, our school librarians are cognitive of and responsive to this evolution, and are harnessing that power to turn the physical library space into an increasingly interactive and collaborative hub for students, while also preserving the role of the library as a quiet space on campus and in the school community for students to unplug, focus, and imagine.

Site Discretionary Funds

Along with support for district-wide programs, BSEP also provides flexible resources to school sites so that principals, teachers, and parent groups can enhance educational opportunities for kids in ways that are specific to their local school community's needs and priorities. These discretionary resources have been utilized to supplement tutoring services and literacy supports, augment after school programs, support gardening programs, counseling services, as well as to add additional arts instruction and even support mentoring and homework clubs.

At the secondary levels, funds for expanded course offerings, or "ECO" funds, provide additional classes that take place before or after the school day. These classes contribute to a wider set of offerings each year in our schools and represent learning experiences that include additional laboratory experience in science, support classes for students taking their first Advanced Placement course, music classes, as well as yearbook staffing and journalism.

School sites want and should have some capacity to innovate and customize some aspects of their program locally. Our district values and invests in the development of effective universal instructional practices across the district, while also recognizing that these site discretionary dollars, when coupled with those larger district-wide resources, support an educational model that blends the benefits of strong and consistent universal practices with an ability for school

sites to be more responsive to and supportive of the individual needs of their particular school communities.

In Summary

The broad-based educational experience our schools are working to provide for kids once again requires a sustained commitment from both educators and our community. To ensure that the pathways and experiences we create for kids have the essential balances of foundational skill-building and creative learning, our schools and our communities must direct and manage resources in a way that supports that premise. While we know that the foundational essentials of reading and written communication skills, as well as a foundational fluency in mathematics and the scientific method are absolutely critical for kids, we also know that we must continuously seek to make their educational experiences vibrant, collaborative, and hands on in other ways so that we continuously pursue a balance between foundational “learning” and plenty of imaginative and contextualized *doing*.

An education that strikes this balance ensures that the fundamentals kids learn can then be sharpened and expanded through cumulative opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in relevant and meaningful scenarios. This better positions them to be able to apply those fundamentals and to effectively create, collaborate, and problem solve in the future. “It is a mistake,” wrote legendary progressive educator John Dewey, “to suppose that acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired.” When schools and educators are thoughtful and committed to continuous reflection, improvement, and innovation for themselves, and are supported by a community partnership such as BSEP, our students will be enriched by their experiences and better prepared to participate in a complex global society with the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards learning that will carry them through life.

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