

SPOTLIGHT ON INNOVATION

BASE Charter School: Building Community Leaders One Project at a Time

In addition to learning fundamental academic skills like reading and math, students at the Bay Area School of Enterprise (BASE) in Alameda are also learning what it means to be a leader. BASE, a charter school designed for youth who go unchallenged or are unsuccessful in the traditional school environment, offers hands-on learning opportunities that integrate core subjects with real-world issues and projects. As a result of this approach, which BASE terms “enterprise learning,” students have demonstrated an extraordinary amount of leadership both in their school and in their community – from helping to design their own curriculum each year to developing large-scale community service projects. Equally impressive to the achievements of the students is the way the teachers and staff at the school have adapted to teaching in this shared-decision-making environment and implemented the school’s project-based curriculum.

Enterprise Learning in Action

Since its inception, BASE has structured itself around fostering student leadership. The school’s original vision was conceived by a group of ten youth involved in The HOME Project, an after-school program in Alameda that now serves as a partner organization with BASE. Excited by the idea of a new kind of school that would integrate community service and

hands-on projects into the curriculum, this group, along with four adults, formed a charter design team, took a self-taught crash course in the charter development process, and drafted a charter, all within five months.

In addition to presenting their petition to the Alameda school board, youth were also responsible for mobilizing more than 300 community members to voice their support for the school. Outreach efforts included presenting at a special City Council meeting, at which more than 200 people turned out to share their ideas and showcase their support to City Council representatives and other community members. As a result of their efforts, the charter received unanimous approval. The experience of designing and starting a school seems to have had a powerful impact on the youth who were involved. “When I first came to HOME Project, I was one of the quietest kids in the group, but ...being in charge of something big really changed me...I’m more assertive, and I express my opinions more. I [also] feel more strongly about public issues,” says Carolyn VerDuin, a recent graduate of BASE and member of the founding Charter Design Team who has enrolled at UC Davis this fall.

Building off of the achievements of the youth who help found the school, students at BASE play critical roles in almost every aspect of running the

school – from setting school policies to maintaining a strong relationship with the Alameda school board. One of the most challenging times for students each year occurs when working with the school staff to create a curriculum that results in “real world” outcomes, such as gaining admittance to a college or finding employment, while at the same time integrating state academic standards. To accomplish this, students first undergo a comprehensive assessment of their academic and personal skills at the beginning of each year. They then work with the teachers to understand this data and how it compares to the academic standards expected by the state. One of the teachers at BASE, etsuko kubo, who works closely with students during this process offered the following thoughts, “...if you take the time to help youth really understand the standards, then together you can connect their interests, community projects, and the content. Not only does this improve their understanding of the basic information, this approach helps youth to see the relevance of what they are learning and doing.” As part of the curriculum development process, students are also expected to help design and co-teach some of the courses. These student-designed and led courses, called “skill seminars,” have covered a wide range of topics from relationship abuse prevention to creative writing and outdoor education. Many students report that this deep level of involve-

ment in shaping the curriculum has greatly added to their own sense of investment in what they learn.

Each year, BASE students also plan a large-scale community service project to integrate into the curriculum. Last year's culminating project, called "Hands In," was a youth/adult summit that brought together community organizations working with youth from around the Bay Area to showcase their work and collaborate on a large-scale art project. The idea for "Hands In" came from students' desire to reinforce the importance of community collaboration and service work in light of September 11 and other recent acts of violence in the U.S. and around the world. Not only did youth generate the idea for the project, they also were responsible for every aspect of its implementation, from recruiting participants to co-leading workshops and facilitating break-out sessions where youth and adults talked about issues they were facing in their communities. Malcolm Lear, a senior at BASE who was actively involved in planning "Hands In," said that the event "created mutual respect and a shared understanding between youth and adults," a primary goal of the project.

Making it Work

Behind many of these student successes is a team of dedicated adults who firmly believe that, if given an opportunity to work on what they care about, youth have an unlimited potential to learn and grow. Director Page Tompkins states, "Adolescents are ready and excited to get involved. Apathy is the result of a lack of opportunity to get engaged." At BASE, the philosophy that everyone should create their own learning opportunities and take responsibility for their learning applies to everyone, teachers included. Tompkins describes the school as a "community of learners" in which

students and staff alike are expected to design learning plans and evaluate their own and others' performance on a regular basis. Just as coaches evaluate students, students also evaluate teachers.

Because teachers are generally neither trained to share power and responsibility with youth, nor trained to design programs that pay attention to the development of the whole person, one of the biggest challenges at BASE has been building a staff that has all of the skills to implement such a unique program. BASE has had to create staff training programs that improve both the staff's instructional skills as well as

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their youth and group development skills. Part of this learning process for staff occurs every other Friday, when the staff spends the afternoon together reflecting on their experience at BASE. During this time, they discuss barriers to growth and identify what support they need to be more effective in their work. Despite limited time and resources, the administrators at BASE appear firmly committed to keeping professional development as a cornerstone of the school's culture.

Another challenge at BASE is that youth usually come to the school from an environment where learning had been a passive affair. Because of the

unique and demanding nature of the school, between ten and fifteen percent of the students each year choose to return to the traditional system. To ensure that students and families are clear about how learning occurs at BASE and what is required of each student, the school has developed an extensive enrollment process that requires attendance at informational events as well as individual family dialogues. School leaders will tell you that at BASE, previous academic performance is not the most significant indicator of student success. Instead, youth with a sincere desire to improve themselves, their school, and their community tend to thrive the most.

Despite numerous obstacles, BASE students have demonstrated substantial gains in their academic and non-academic achievements. Because of its comprehensive approach to educating youth, BASE measures student success not only in terms of intellectual development, but also in terms of social, civic, and emotional development. In addition to monitoring academic performance by tracking grades and test scores, the school's evaluation team utilizes other tools to gather qualitative and quantitative data about each student's progress. Over the past couple years, the evaluation team has been able to track steady improvements in their students' academic performance as well as positive social and emotional gains. Yet more important than being able to confirm their progress, BASE staff and youth report the value of this information is in being able to adjust and improve their current program.

Administrators at the Bay Area School of Enterprise attribute their positive results to a wide variety of factors, including: an extended school day and academic year (BASE requires additional project work and schoolwork on

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Increased Scrutiny for Charter School Grant Recipients

Recent federal regulation updates to the Public Charter Schools Grant Program scrutinize the business practices of current start-up, implementation, and dissemination grant recipients. Specifically, these new federal regulations add provisions that address conflict of interest and standards for procuring goods and services. The federal government's aim is to prevent charter school grant recipients from using these funds for private financial gain.

Though managed by the California Department of Education (CDE), the source of funds for the Public Charter Schools Grant Program originates from the federal government. Accordingly, changes to federal regulations influence the CDE grant program's policies and procedures. In turn, these policies and procedures are applied to the charter school grant recipients.

Two sets of regulations have been added to prevent personal financial gain. The first regulation (34 CFR 75.525) addresses conflict of interest. Specifically, the regulations restrict a public official or person with a family or professional relationship with the grantee from making management decisions about the grant project that

may provide them with personal benefit, including benefits to family members. While the updates to federal regulations do not cite specific guidelines, CSDC suggests that in order to comply, charter school employees and board members should publicly announce any known conflicts of interest in advance of receiving grant funds and recuse themselves from final decision-making or voting responsibilities when a conflict of interest arises.

The second set of regulations outlines procurement standards and practices to ensure "open and free competition" for purchasing goods and services (34 CFR 74.40-74.48). The regulations outline several specific aspects of the competitive bidding process. For example, no one with a conflict of interest as outlined above may help make the decision about who receives the contract. In addition, any contractor that helps the grantee develop a request for proposal for services is prohibited from putting in a bid to perform those services. Contracts should be awarded to the bidder whose proposal is the most advantageous in terms of "price, quality, and other factors considered." CSDC recommends that charter schools should solicit at least two or

three competitive bids when purchasing goods and services.

In addition, the regulations contain further stipulations for procurements over \$25,000 that are secured without competition, for which only one bid or offer is received, which specify a "brand name" product, or which are awarded to a contractor that is not the apparent lowest bidder. In these cases, the grantee should be prepared to make available documentation of the request for proposal or invitation for bids, independent cost estimates, and other relevant pre-award review and procurement documents. These records must indicate why a particular contractor was selected, the basis for the final price determination, and, when applicable, an explanation for the lack of competition.

For more information about the new federal regulations and the Public Charter Schools Grant Program, stay posted to the CSDC website at www.cacharterschools.org, the U.S. Department of Education website at www.ed.gov, and the CDE website at www.cde.ca.gov/charter/funding/fundgrants.html.

- Stephanie Chan and Laurie Gardner

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weekends and over the summer), a low student-teacher ratio (classes are no larger than 20:1), and an emphasis on teaching behavior rather than managing behavior. Director Page Tompkins also notes, "We are constantly re-evaluating what's really important for students to know and be able to do, and we keep learning in alignment with that focus." Despite the apparent successes of the school thus far, students, teachers, and administrators at the Bay Area School of Enterprise show no signs of becoming complacent but appear intent on keeping the school a fluid learning environment, shaped by the changing needs and interests of the youth who attend each year.

- Julie Obbard