

Student Life Modeling Group

Recommendations January 2014

Background: At the request of the School Committee and Superintendent Kingston, the student life modeling group set out to understand how the students of Belmont Public Schools are currently being supported in the area of social and emotional development. An inventory of supports currently in place was developed, analyzed, and prioritized. This process revealed several emerging trends that all fall under a larger umbrella of stress, anxiety, depression, and mental health issues. Some of the subcategories include issues relating to the social and emotional abilities young children are coming to school with, stressed staff and families, community support, and parent/guardian knowledge for how to support development, as well as their child's personal safety.

We believe that the children of Belmont are experiencing an increased level of stress, anxiety, depression, and mental health issues, K-12. In order to address and unravel such a vast and complex set of issues, the modeling group classified the trends into subcategories. We further identified the specific issue, our rationale for why we believe this to be an issue, and a possible solution for how we might go about addressing the specific issue. What follows is a "straw man" representation for how we might tackle these complex trends and issues facing our Belmont students.

a. **Recommendation #1:**

Issue: Lack of a holistic strategy

- i. **Rationale:** We currently have an inventory of K-12 student supports in place; however, these supports are not aligned to a systemic strategy especially aimed at addressing the issues of social and emotional learning. By not having a clear strategy in place, supports have been randomly added over time to address some needs. This response-to-issues approach is not effective, and has resulted in students having significant support gaps, K-12. Since we are now at a tipping point in our school system, we feel it is prudent to first develop a holistic strategy aimed at addressing these specific issues through a comprehensive K-12 lens.
- ii. **Solution:** Assemble a cross functional team with the charge of creating a holistic strategy with specific steps outlined for each of these recommendations. This plan must align to the Belmont strategic plan and should include a clear picture for what success looks like, the specific steps we will need to take in order to fulfill the holistic strategy, a realistic timeline for each step, and an implementation rubric so the School Committee can assess progress throughout implementation. **Cost Estimate: \$1,700.** We envision these funds to be used for possible staff release time,

substitute teacher coverage time, and/or travel expenses, onetime expense.

b. **Recommendation #2:**

Issue: Inadequate crisis intervention and social and emotional support

- i. **Rationale:** Throughout all of our schools, there are a substantial number of students experiencing crisis level situations. It seems these numbers are increasing by the day whereby creating a compounded issue. The guidance counselors at each school are spending between 50% and 100% of their work dealing with the complex issues these few students, in crisis, face. This focus, while critical to the students in need, prohibits the same staff members from providing vital social and emotional support to other students not in crisis, preventatively. This compounded issue literally “feeds” a pipeline in each school whereby “fixing” the guidance role mostly in a crisis management mode. This crisis management includes responding to students during dysregulation using CPI techniques, writing incident reports, creating and implementing student behavior plans, working with faculty and administration regarding appropriate follow-up with families and other community agencies, and helping students transition back from mental health facilities into the school setting, etc.

Guidance counselors are also engaged in a high volume of social work related tasks with a few families who seem to need a disproportionate level of support from the school. We are strongly recommending we address all of these issues: handling students in crisis as well as preventing issues from arising by providing adequate social and emotional support. In order to do this we must make an investment in staff. We need both pro-active guidance counselors, staff specifically dedicated to crisis, as well as a leader for this group of professionals. Guidance counselors are needed in order to provide an adequate level of social and emotional support to all students. We need staff members who are specifically dedicated for the purpose of responding to and managing all aspects of students experiencing crises. And, in order to maintain a focus on proactive as well as reactive social and emotional supports for students, we also recommend a leader who can oversee and support the entire K-12 program. This will ensure that

social and emotional support programming is consistently delivered among all of the Belmont schools.

Important to note: Ongoing crisis management has taken the toll on other staff members as well. Many staff members have indicated that they are incredibly stressed by their inability to address so many competing priorities. Educator efficacy is a concern because what impacts staff members also has an impact on students, at all grade levels.

- ii. **Solution**: Add seven additional FTE, two for each level and one to serve as the coordinator. The six staff for the schools will need to be trained to specifically handle students in crisis whereby, releasing our current guidance counseling team to proactively provide social and emotional support to students who are not in crisis. Each level would determine how to best use this FTE allotment. For example, the high school may be best served by adding two additional guidance counselors where as the elementary level may need highly trained inclusion experts. **Cost Estimate: \$472,500, annually.**

c. **Recommendation #3:**

Issue: Inconsistent curriculum and lack of fidelity in approach

- i. **Rationale:** We currently have several different social and emotional learning programs being implemented at the K-4 level, a few lessons in grade 5, including DARE in grade 5 at the middle level, and a few classes at the high school level. By not having a clear scope and sequence specific for stress, anxiety, depression, and mental health issues, K-8, our students are not set-up for success. The impact of not having a comprehensive, instructional curriculum that is integrated into daily academic practices, with fidelity, has had the following outcomes, all of which are highly disruptive to an educational environment:
 1. Older students are participating in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol, marijuana use, improperly using the internet, bullying, and fighting.
 2. Younger students are displaying less ability to regulate emotion, problem solve, and to show empathy for others.
- ii. **Solution A:** Implement a K-8 sustainable and research-based curriculum that provides explicit instruction around the three proven

areas of social and emotional development: emotional processes, social/interpersonal skills, and cognitive regulation. This curriculum should be implemented with fidelity and integrated into the context of both the school and community. This curriculum must have a K-8 scope and sequence without any gaps, year-to-year. Note: It is recommended that the CASEL guide of SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) as well as the study of SEL (submitted with this recommendation) both serve as guides in this curriculum selection process. Since there is no curriculum for the high school level, we recommend that the high school have funds they can access for the purpose of addressing these issues with special leadership activities, guest speakers, instructors to conduct stress reduction classes, and/or other such processes for high school students. Cost Estimates: K-8: \$375 per/teacher (124 teachers) = \$46,500.00 for a onetime purchase. Plus, 9-12: \$25,000, annually, (46 Homerooms) Total Cost Estimate: \$71,500.

- iii. **Solution B:** Research and then possibly expand pilot programs designed to assist young students identified as needing more support to develop specific skills, such as learning the routines of school or to have more time to engage in play. There are several programs that have been piloted throughout the elementary schools such as:
1. **Jump Start**, a first grade preview summer intervention for at risk students transitioning from Kindergarten to first grade. Cost Estimates: \$12,000 for all four elementary schools, annually.
 2. **Summer reading (RTI) programs for K-2 students**. Cost Estimates: \$15,000 for all elementary schools, annually.
 3. **SMART**, a school readiness program for K-2 students. Cost Estimates: \$4,000 for curriculum (all for schools, one-off); \$35,000 for initial training (for all four schools); and \$2,000 (for all new staff) annual costs after initial investment to train new staff.
 4. **Others:** There are several other national movements we recommend to be further investigated such as "Let's Get Moving" which encourages 60 minutes of play a day and the "Whole Child Movement" which is a movement among early childhood educators to ensure that all elements of a young child's early development is part of educational programming.

d. **Recommendation #4:**

Issue: High and often unrealistic standards

- i. **Rationale:** The Belmont community has very high standards for its children. There is very real pressure from parents/guardians and teachers alike for students to perform and to “do it all”! This is evidenced by large numbers of students receiving tutoring, attending Saturday school on weekends, and being sleep deprived.
- ii. **Solution:** Implement monthly, pre-planned strategic K-12 activities for all students as well as parents/guardians that will permeate the culture of Belmont whereby influencing change. Such activities will begin to help shape a focus in our community around the impacts stress, depression, anxiety, and mental health issues have on our children and staff. Identify a lead person at each school, responsible for arranging and implementing relevant activities. Examples include: Yoga day, mental health day, PE, dance, no homework weekends, parent/guardian support groups, guest speakers for parents/guardians and staff members, etc. Acknowledge students and staff for leading a balanced life. These people could also coordinate efforts with the staff from recommendation #8 of this document. Cost Estimate: \$2000 per/school for staff stipends and \$1,000 per/school for activities supplies, annually. Total Cost Estimate: \$12,000, annually.

e. **Recommendation #5:**

Issue: Students in transition

- i. **Rationale:** We have a high number of students transitioning into and out of our typical classroom settings, who need a high level of support as well as a temporary or transitional school-based program. Right now this support is a reactive process that falls on the guidance counselors, nurses, administrators, and other educators, so as the needs arise these staff members have to entirely shift all other work streams. These cases are complex and can often disrupt the high school and middle school for weeks.
- ii. **Solution:** Dedicate space and staff for students experiencing major school-to-hospitalization and/or school-to-program transitions. Cost Estimate \$270,000, annually. We envision this paying for two high school and two middle school staff members.

f. **Recommendation #6:**

Issue: Lack of free recreation activities during and after school

- i. **Rationale:** The elementary and middle schools have after school enrichment programs and after school supervision activities for students. Both of these fee-based programs are filled to capacity and many have wait lists. Offering some type of cost free activities in spaces throughout the school district and/or homework support to students via the public library or other venues would also help give students who need support have the support they need during the after school hours.

Note: There are some issues inherent in using spaces in the town and we do not have enough interested support staff to leverage during this time of day. Schools do not have space until after 6PM and the COA has no access until after 4PM. Churches all charge rental fees. The Recreation Department has had a difficult time finding both paid and unpaid tutors between 2:30PM and 6:00PM. For 15% of fees collected, the Parks and Recreation department will assist interested class instructors in finding space and/or connecting them with potential students for special classes such as yoga for teens.

- ii. **Solution A:** Partner with the Belmont Parks and Recreation Department and library systems to create more opportunities for free drop-in activities, and homework support for upper elementary through high school aged students. Cost Estimate: \$6,000 per/site for staff hourly pay, annually.
- iii. **Solution B:** Provide time, within the high school day, for a staff member to operate an "open gym" for high school students needing a place to go between classes. Also, provide staff to conduct intramural sporting activities after school at the middle school level. Cost Estimate: \$6,000 stipend to cover open gym during the school day and \$ 14,500 for after school intramural sports and, annually. Total Cost Estimate for Solution B: \$20,500, annually.

g. **Recommendation #7:**

Issue: Sleep deprivation

- i. **Rationale:** Teenagers are experiencing alarming levels of sleep deprivation in the Belmont community. There are a number of factors contributing to this issue that include school-based activities and homework, as well as out of school activities such as

employment and clubs. There is significant research on this subject and we strongly recommend aligning our actions to the research.

- ii. **Solution:** Adjust start times for high school and middle school to align with research on brain development and the impact sleep deprivation has on teenagers. **Cost Estimate: Not determined.**

h. **Recommendation #8:**

Issue: Demand for liaison police officer is too great for current staffing

- i. **Rationale:** Our community is changing and with that change comes more community conflict and more need to offer true educational outreach to families. As a result, we have a need to maintain a more focused connection between the Belmont Police Department, the school system, and parents/guardians. Right now, officers contact school administrators after responding to conflicts in homes where school children reside and there is no organized effort to assist parents/guardians in building skills around the complex issues facing children such as stress, depression, anxiety, personal safety, drugs, and alcohol use. The necessary follow-up that is required as a preventative measure or a follow-up to conflict alone is daunting and somewhat inconsistent due to volume.
- ii. **Solution:** Hire a School Resource Officer with a BA, to serve as a liaison between the school, families, and the police department in Belmont. This liaison would also be charged with partnering with the Middlesex District Attorney's office to develop a comprehensive parent/guardian educational series. We envision at least six to eight educational sessions open to all families, to occur each year in the following categories: violence prevention, personal safety, social hosting, drugs and alcohol, child development, health and wellness, motivation, and diversity/inclusion. **Cost Estimate: \$55,000 for liaison position and \$15,000 for speaker fees and materials, annually.**

Item:	Annual Estimated Cost:	One-Time Estimated Cost:	Grand Total:
Recommendation #1	Sum	\$1,700.00	\$1,700.00
Recommendation #2	\$472,500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Recommendation #3 A	\$25,000.00	\$46,500.00	\$46,500.00
Recommendation #3 B	\$64,000.00	\$4,000.00	\$4,000.00
Recommendation #4	\$12,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Recommendation #5	\$270,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Recommendation #6 A	\$12,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Recommendation # 6 B	\$20,500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Recommendation #7	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Recommendation #8	\$70,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
	\$946,000.00	\$52,200.00	\$998,200.00