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Best Starts for Kids: Exploring Equitable School Partnerships

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Case Study of Mill Creek Middle School



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Strategy, Evaluation and Learning
Puget Sound Educational Service District

King County’s Best Starts for Kids (BSK) has invested in School Partnership (SP) strategies so that “School environments are safe, supportive, respectful and engaging environments for young people, staff and families. Race, ethnicity or cultural identity does not impact access to these environments.”

This is a case study of the BSK-supported partnerships at [Mill Creek Middle School](#) in [Kent School District](#). Mill Creek Middle School is one of nine King County schools—each with its own combination of BSK investments and partner organizations—that are part of the Year 1 BSK School Partnerships evaluation. The BSK School Partnerships evaluation focuses on schools with multiple BSK investments to understand how and what types of partnerships are developing across different BSK strategy areas in each school. The Mill Creek partnership includes BSK investments in Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral To Services (SBIRT) and Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices (TIRP) strategy areas. Mill Creek has a long history with community partners, and has worked closely with Communities in Schools of Kent (CISK), Kent Youth and Family Services (KYFS), and Restore-Assemble-Produce (RAP), to implement the SBIRT and TIRP investments from BSK. The Year 1 evaluation focuses particularly on Mill Creek’s partnership with RAP, and their role with SBIRT and TIRP. In Year 2, we will expand the focus to include Mill Creek’s partnerships with CISK and KYFS, as well. To learn more about the BSK School Partnerships evaluation, including Year 1 methods and results, please refer to the Year 1 Final Report Executive Summary at: <https://strategy.psesd.org/current-evaluation-projects/best-starts-for-kids>.





Mill Creek Middle School is highlighted for two main reasons. One, because the information gathered for the school come from a variety of perspectives – from the TIRP CBO awardee, Restore Assemble Produce (RAP), school leadership and staff, and Kent School District (KSD) leaders. Two, in examining the types of the partnerships found in the school, we assessed its SBIRT partnership to be Collaborative, its TIRP partnership to be Integrated, and overall, its cross-strategy partnership to be Integrated as well. In Mill Creek Middle School, SBIRT partners could refer students to services provided by RAP and RAP supported SBIRT activities in multiple ways, from the SBIRT introduction to parents and students, to its roll-out and full implementation in the school. SBIRT partners share an office with Mill Creek school counseling staff while RAP staff were present in the school every day which facilitated communication and collaboration across the board.

The *vision shared* across partners in Mill Creek Middle School, is to provide equitable access for students to programs and services; improve climate of the school; and eliminate suspensions and expulsions. According to one of the KSD leaders, the school's vision is aligned with district vision of student success, with SBIRT as one component supporting students to address trauma through behavior & mental health, and with TIRP growing the students' ability to cope and expand their social emotional skills.

Of the Mill Creek Middle School population, the School Principal spoke about the high diversity in the school. Compared to other middle schools in the school district, Mill Creek Middle School was noted to have very high numbers of students of color, English language Learners, low-income students and homeless students.¹ And as the School Principal stated, the diversity in the student population "... speaks to...our various needs." And as a school leader stated, the diversity in the student population "...speaks to...our various needs."

Trusting Relationships & Leadership. Given its myriad needs, the school has looked to accessing services provided by different community organizations for their students. And in 2017-18, RAP received a TIRP

mini grant and their experience working with a school paved the way for understanding how to partner and work collaboratively within a school setting. Mill Creek Middle School became the partner for the TIRP mini grant awarded to RAP. The mini grant set up the opportunity for Mill Creek Middle School administration and staff to build and establish a trusting relationship with RAP leadership and staff and this relationship has supported the first-year full implementation in 2018-19 of both TIRP and SBIRT strategies at the school. The relationship between Mill Creek Middle School, RAP, and KSD and its SBIRT partners has been nurtured by a predominantly positive regard for one another that were expressed by the various actors—RAP's executive director, RAP's TIRP Coordinator, the Mill Creek Middle School counselor who has helped lead the SBIRT work in the school, the School Principal and other school leaders including the Assistant Principal, and the KSD Student and Family Support Services directors. Moreover, RAP leaders and school partners report on the status of power sharing and the need for a clear focus on equity.

"Our RAP partner is on our student school improvement plan team. She's on our leadership team. So the work they're doing, and the work we already have in line with our school improvement plan and vision for our school, is aligned already, but the RAP is on that team and we have several students on that team as well." – School Principal

1 Data reviewed to help compare Mill Creek Middle School with other middle schools in the school district are from <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/>.

"Being able to work with a group of agencies, partners that utilizes your talents and your energies in a manner that makes this all work for the student and the families. That's what it's all about..." – School Counselor

*"The [TIRP] grant focuses on racial trauma. The power dynamics of partners were unified, it allowed us to conduct the racism pieces of the professional development of the staff. [The] Principal supported this work; he said that our staff needs this. The issues and behaviors that students are displaying-it is not their fault. Their behavior is not the only issue. Equity states that [staff] have to understand their role in the trauma. I have to give props to the principal for sharing his power."
– RAP Executive Director*

"How schools are different in partnering with CBOS or with one another? [With CBOs] It looks incredibly different in every building. The one at Mill Creek Middle School, they're kind of part of their school success team. And so there's a team of people that all focus on school success. So a portion of that is the [full-time mental health] counselor, a portion of that is their behavior interventionists, as well as our people from [another CBO]. And so they work alongside each other in the same workspace. And it's a team." – Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Assistant Director

This perception of shared leadership is also experienced by the school counselor who stated that because of her interest in SBIRT and area of expertise, the school's administration trusted her to write the grant for her school and help shape the implementation of SBIRT in Mill Creek Middle School alongside SBIRT district and community partners. For SBIRT efforts, the close collaboration and communication was further facilitated by shared space.

Flexibility & Roles. In turn, the school's administration, school staff, and district personnel acknowledged the leadership role of the TIRP CBO awardee which, in turn, made space for the voices of other stakeholders in the school community to be heard. The RAP Executive Director was included as a school representative in SBIRT meetings, and as one of the providers of support for identified Tier 2 and Tier 3 students. In addition, this TIRP awardee will be gearing up to be part of SBIRT screening efforts in Year 2. The school counselor referred to RAP as a 'gap filler', i.e., an organization that provided needed services where there were none.

"Right before SBIRT, RAP saw a need for a consistent mentoring program which was an area that RAP saw, and then worked to quickly fill. RAP did establish groups; started meeting with students; got buy in from students, formed norms/rules/meeting times and talked with parents. Although a lot of our students were over 13, RAP thought it important to include parents and explain parents' participation and support needed. This mentoring program was highly successful and the students continued. It was all about the students and whatever was going on with them. Basically, RAP met all of Maslow's hierarchy of needs so that students would continue to return and participate in the program. RAP provided a consistent continuum of care for them."

- School Counselor

"Beginning with the administration, specifically with the principal, vice-principal, and school counselor staff and after school programs, our innovative team meetings helped clarify our willingness to assist in any way to help each sector from the school meet their specific goals. This helped them to see we were interested in what they cared about." - RAP Executive Director

The *changes in Practice, Policy, Systems & Environment* that the equitable school partnerships at Mill Creek Middle School are seeking to achieve are aligned with their expressed vision for student access to supports, reduction in suspensions and expulsions through increased attendance, and school staff growth in adopting and utilizing restorative practices. One recent district-wide change that impacts Mill Creek Middle School as well as other schools in the district is a new suicide prevention policy.

"A continuation of building stronger systems and structures that allow for kids to be able to be identified and triaged so they can actually get the supports they need. I think that will be through regular collaboration, regular team/partner meetings, also through our students of concern and our student support team meetings - and of course just making referrals to counselors."

- School Principal

"Another big shift for us in a focus area is attendance, so we trained all of our teachers to say, hey, when a kid returns from an absence, it's as simple as saying, "Hey, I am really glad that you are here today" instead of, "Do you know what you missed? You need to make up that work you missed." Instead, "Hey, we missed you and want to make sure you get back on track. Here is a folder of some things you missed or click on these links so that you can get caught up. I am really glad you are here today." Just that simple shift in what teachers say was a huge impact to dramatically improve attendance during the last quarter of our school year. So just a simple way that teachers – they do not even realize it, but it's an implicit bias they have shown through the way that they question and respond to kids that we have to overcome and that's one thing that we are doing too." – School Principal

"Collaborative work with CBO partners have got us thinking of new work on discipline policies and procedures – what role might a CBO serve in either trying to avoid suspension or when a child is suspended, giving them additional resources that they can be referred to – to get facts sooner to avoid suspension. I don't think that we would have come to that same conclusion if we had not been doing this work."

– Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Executive Director

"To make change happens, it takes times. Internally and externally, processes have to be changed. To move from a less punitive model, practices have to be restorative. Half of the principal's staff, he chose personally. Restorative work [is] needed for disciplinary actions. Needs a chance for this to be implemented in the schools." - RAP TIRP Coordinator

"Through PD classes on Racism and Racial Trauma - our approach of telling the truth, but telling the truth in love, opened the eyes of many of the teachers whom we encountered and attended the classes. They know now that the students know the difference between racism and are not just saying things because, but it is a real experience to them. The teachers now know that we as a community-based organization we'll hold them accountable to certain implicit and explicit biases when parents and students share racial trauma issues. The school staff also knows they can trust us to come in and address a racial situation in fairness."

- RAP Executive Director

"We did not have a clear suicide prevention policy or procedure district wide – or what we had was really weak – so we actually have been able to take it on and make it strong. Influence not just the middle school but the whole system and as we have been implementing that this year, we have been learning a lot and making changes and adjustments along the way and will continue to do so." – Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Executive Director

"[T]he biggest change that we've had beginning of this year because we knew where we were going to do this, we put in place our suicide prevention policy. The district previously did not have one. And so we've put that in place. Along with putting that policy in place. We ended up having collaborative work sessions, along with our counselors, our psychologists, and our nurses around how to have a screening tool that we all can use within our schools, as well as have supporting documents to build safety plans for our students, flow charts to know exactly the steps we're taking to follow our policy and what trainings we're going to need in the future and this year. So along with that policy, we ended up having Crisis Connections come out and do training with all of the counselors, nurses, and psychologists."

– Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Assistant Director

TIRP and SBIRT partners in the school acknowledged the importance of *King County-BSK Team support* to their work. School partners were complimentary of BSK for its responsiveness to the needs of students and schools and for convening of meetings that brought different awardees and districts together enabling networking and learning as a larger community.



"This particular grant-they have an awesome team. We are always having meetings. We have cohorts of grantees coming together. There have been convening. We are helping with resources for one another. I can go on and on. Any technical assistance-bookkeeping, evaluation. They are setting us up to win. They are there for whatever we need. Email, calls, or both." – RAP Executive Director

"I think that the support I've seen has been just phenomenal...a preventative model which was groundbreaking. Now King County is linking all Districts to have a model that works for our traumatized students, but also serves as a preventive model for students who may fall under the radar. Such examples could be our highly capable students who are feeling pressure of their academic world to just students having a bad day or no one has asked me how I feel to no one really cares. So this model encompasses all students, irrespective of their levels of trauma. However, most kids, all persons at some point in their lives are going to experience some type of trauma. Both the SBIRT and TIRP models speak to that and it is ultra-important to see the scope for every student and for different families. You want to be able to see everyone with a wider lens." – School Counselor

"[BSK staff] has been amazing at contacting me back immediately and troubleshooting errors and that kind of thing. So, she has been a wonderful asset to this project. As far as other things, BSK SBIRT staff have been really good about connecting us with other districts so that we could utilize similar materials and that kind of thing." – Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Assistant Director

*Year 2 Opportunities for Coordination, Services and Support:*² The various partners in the school have identified opportunities that can further buoy their work of serving students in the school. One aspect would be ensuring equal access to services for all students in need, including by improved identification and referral of students by teachers to counselors. Another is a continuing need to support staff around secondary trauma as part of their focus on trauma-informed approaches, while also attending to staff's role in the trauma that students experience. Also expressed was a desire for cross-stakeholder training; assistance in supporting collaboration across strategy areas within schools; and more opportunities for connecting with other districts just as connections are made between awardees in different BSK strategy areas. Finally, it was noted that there is limited bandwidth to onboard partners at the school level, so district and BSK support for onboarding processes and protocols would be helpful.

² We note that the areas of opportunity in school, district, and CBO collaborations can pertain to collaborations amongst various organizations in general, and not specifically to the BSK-funded work only.

"It's unique to have community partners as part of this work. Need training to be able to do that work together, because that is needed as well. We have a contract with them and what we have found is that communication and that relationship continues to need to be fostered throughout. And make sure that if there are struggles that are happening in building around the community partner, they need to be addressed early. [Otherwise,] people get frustrated with the purpose for the partnership in the first place."

- Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Executive Director

"[Cross-strategy work] takes some coordinating at King County level as well... There needs to be opportunities to do things district by district. Everyone would need to come together a couple of times a year. King County overseeing these grants, community partners who receive these grants, and the schools that are involved. So, if they don't show up at these meetings, there needs to be some accountability If the meetings are on the book long before, people should be able to rearrange schedules and things, understand that this is natural priority attached to your funding, people will make it a priority. We all work better when there is some accountability to it - bottom line."

- Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Executive Director

"I would love to see there be some kind of an onboarding for community partners. The Assistant Principal was talking about this just this morning with me. That is that any community partners need to come in with MOU. They should have a clear purpose. They should also understand the way that they can have access to student information, like Skyward."

- School Principal

"We run the data structure at the counselor meetings. Going into this, I did not realize that there would be as much district level work needed as there has turned out to be. We found out once we got the grant. We thought that it would be just work in the schools individually but it has turned out to be much bigger for district because there are so many things that we need to be thinking about around screening, trainers, data collection, legal applications and things that go along with it."

- Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Assistant Director

"Glad the work is getting done. I do not see anything so insurmountable that cannot be worked out. I also believe that it is a benefit to award grants to districts and CBOs. Just takes a little more work to sort it all out but it is worth the work."

- Kent School District Student and Family Support Services Executive Director

Indeed, strong as they have been, Mill Creek Middle School coordination structures are experienced as being at maximum capacity and with increasing demands of partnership requests (e.g., school or student data), it has been challenging to respond to requests and maintain partnerships with limited resources and people power. Although a concerted effort to maintain high level of organization and coordination in order to maintain high quality programs/partnerships is made, it still requires significant effort of administrative staff at both the school and district levels. There is expressed hope and anticipation for assistance from BSK School Partnerships program staff to help school, district, and CBO partners address challenges and further improve collaborative work with each other to achieve better integrated services for students that will support positive outcomes.





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