

October 10, 2015

Dear Berkeley High School Parents and Guardians,

Good Afternoon.

I want to update our school community on some of the work that we are engaged in, in our efforts to achieve [Berkeley's 2020 Vision](#) with the aim of ending the racial predictability of academic achievement, while also addressing the school improvement suggestions that the 2014 Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) visit identified. Specifically, we are working on plans to close opportunity gaps. Our belief is that improving our school culture is foundational to our ability to educate every student.

We have made great headway as a school in these efforts already. Berkeley High School's graduation rate has climbed 5% from 2010 to 2014, and the graduation rate for African American and Latino/a students far exceeds neighboring school districts and the state, as dropout rates for these student groups have plummeted at BHS over the past five years. Our college-going rates for African American and Latino/a students have increased: 85.0% of African American students (class of 2013) were enrolled in college within two years of graduation; 83.3% for Hispanic/Latino/a and 87% for all students.

That said, we can—and must—do more for underserved students.

My belief is that when we embrace social justice and work to create an inclusive and positive school culture, we humanize our community. Given the recent national focus on structural racism and police brutality on African Americans, Berkeley High School is poised to do important work in its pursuit of the goals outlined in the *2020 Vision*. We are examining our own structures and resources to determine how we contribute to the inequitable outcomes for racial groups of students at Berkeley High School.

We are laying out a multi-step plan, and implementing a number of changes to address school culture in the current school year. After the past two years in which sexual harassment and incidents involving racism have harmed our school community and climate, one immediate change we have made this year is for all 9th graders to take an academically-rigorous course titled Ethnic Studies/Social Living. This is part of our effort to ensure that students learn about their own identity as well as the identity of their peers from different cultures and backgrounds. In the Social Living component of this course, students are learning how to lead healthful and responsible lives in our increasingly complicated, global world. BHS graduates should be academically prepared *and* know how to be good community members.

Additional efforts we are engaged in to improve school culture this year are teacher professional development workshops related to Culturally Competent Teaching as well as a Restorative Justice initiative we are implementing. We are also educating students and staff on identifying and responding to sexual harassment. We want to create the conditions for an 'upstander' orientation to bullying and harassment, rather than a bystander response, among faculty and students.

Going forward, a Design Team of teachers and administrators has been assembled to continue this work.

Key focus areas include:

- the 9th grade instructional program and ensuring a successful transition during one of the most critical years of high school
- increasing our ability to personalize learning for all students
- opportunities for students to build relationships across the small schools and programs
- supports and interventions for at-risk students

A teacher/administrator Design Team selected by the BHS administration and the Berkeley Federation of Teachers, will meet together throughout the course of the 2015-2016 school year to consider multiple options for strengthening our current 9th grade program and/or designing reforms for meeting the needs of all students at Berkeley High. The Design Team will also conduct a broad "Listening Campaign" throughout the community to hear from all stakeholders. In addition, the team is charged with the responsibility to respond to the most recent WASC report that highlights the importance of closing opportunity gaps and improving school culture. Please be on the lookout for further updates on the Design Team's work and ways to get involved and have your voice heard. Finally, any structural changes that the Design Team recommends will take effect no sooner than the 2017-18 school year, and we are now working on a timeline to share with our stakeholder groups.

I am so happy to be here as the new principal and am really thankful for the many warm welcomes I am receiving from parents and students. My hope is that we can take a hard look at what we do well and what we can do better, and stick together as we navigate sometimes difficult but exciting change processes.

Warm Regards,

Sam Pasarow