

June 6, 2021

Re: End of Year Letter

Dear McKinley families,

As I reflect upon this past year, so many words come to mind: challenging, overwhelming, stressful, scary. However, the words that come to mind when I think about McKinley are ones of pride and celebration: togetherness, creativity, flexibility, compassion, and family. The pandemic, which for many schools limited the school experience, at McKinley it brought out the best in us. It is with immense pride and gratitude that I share about the numerous accomplishments we have to celebrate from this past year.

At McKinley it was a priority to continue to have community building and family events to give our students a sense of normalcy, school pride, and a feeling of joy and connectedness. Staff and families worked together to creatively transform our traditions into fun virtual experiences and McKinley stood out with numerous community events and engagement opportunities:

- TK and Kindergarten students were welcomed to McKinley with a **Virtual Playdate Magic Show** which inspired Mac the Lion to do some magic at the Harvest Festival.
- We had a great turnout at our **Virtual Movie Night** with over 240 families viewing the movie and 60 students chatting in Zoom during the film. Many students used the provided movie activity pack to enhance the experience.
- At our **Virtual Talent Show** we had over 50 student performances and more than 700 members of the McKinley community viewed the show. It was heartwarming to see how confident, proud, and creative the students were, and to feel the warmth, love, and support of their family members shining through the screen.
- We had an amazing **Virtual Harvest Festival** spearheaded by parent volunteers. At a website students could select different doors to enter a variety of fun online activities such as a petting zoo, cooking spooky foods, and more. Students also got to pick up evidence bags to guide their exploration of the scary **Virtual Haunted House**.
- At our **Virtual Family Literacy Night** families heard presentations and read alouds from two award winning authors, and joined Zoom breakout rooms led by teachers to participate in fun literacy activities.
- Wonderful artwork from the students who participated in the PTA Reflections Art Content was displayed for all to enjoy in a **Drive-Thru Art Show** in the McKinley parking lot.
- We had a **Virtual Winter Sing-a-long** where students shared beautiful holiday songs and dances on Flipgrid.
- McKinley had a **Spirit Week** with students dressing up in spiritwear, friendship colors, crazy hair, sports gear, and of course our favorite pandemic attire, pajamas.
- Student Council fourth and fifth graders made over 400 heart cards and posted them on the fence outside the school so every student could get a special message on **Valentine's Day**.
- During **Black History Month** students had the opportunity to make videos sharing about their favorite hero in history and all students got to view the videos during Friday Announcements to learn more about the influential figures.

- The Jog-a-thon was creatively transformed into the **Move-a-thon** to encourage physical activity and build community during the pandemic. Activity game cards were completed, students donned their McKinley Mac the Lion sweatband, over 400 videos were posted by students, and over \$10,000 was raised for McKinley! The event concluded with a spirited Virtual Dance Party.
- Families moved and grooved together when they learned a dance at our **Virtual Family Dance Night** led by PS Arts.
- To celebrate McKinley's diversity students were invited to post videos to share about their culture and history at our **Virtual International Day**.
- During **Staff Appreciation Week** PTA provided special treats to staff as well as a delicious luncheon with individualized notes of gratitude from students attached to each lunch.
- McKinley celebrated our 5th grade graduates at an in-person **Culmination** with a presentation of certificates and awards, and a clap out ceremony where all students applauded their peers.
- McKinley created a **school yearbook** full of pictures to memorialize the year and made a printed version available to all families to purchase.

McKinley parents continued to be actively involved in the school community. The involvement and support were crucial to our success and helped to make school a happy and safe place for our students:

- McKinley continued to have **regular meetings** on Zoom for PTA, School Site Council, English Learner Advisory Council, African American Support Group, and Special Education Resource Group.
- **Special committees** of parents and staff met frequently to provide important support to the school including Room Parent Committee, Staff Appreciation Committee, Harvest Festival Committee, 5th Grade Culmination Committee, Move-a-thon Committee, PTA Executive Board and more.
- McKinley created our own "**Distance Learning Parent Academy**" where staff hosted weekly workshops/trainings for parents. School specialists and staff presented about topics related to Distance Learning and the pandemic such as technology access, self-regulation, coping skills, instructional support, and literacy and math modules.
- McKinley's school counselor led a **Reflective Parenting Training**, an innovative experiential 12 week workshop designed to enhance parenting skills.
- McKinley hosted a **TK/K Roundup** on Zoom for incoming families to share all about our wonderful school. This event featured a new **Virtual School Tour** (available on the website) of photos of the beautiful campus, as well as videos of teachers teaching social-emotional learning.

Another priority for McKinley was the social-emotional health of our students. Staff taught the Whole Child and implemented a variety of strategies to help students feel engaged and connected to their school community:

- Teachers had **daily Morning Community Meetings** and utilized our Second Step Social Skills Curriculum, Olweus Anti-Bullying lessons, Responsive Classroom and Restorative Justice techniques, and incorporated the Social Justice Standards to teach social-emotional learning skills.
- Numerous students volunteered to be special helpers and video stars in McKinley's recorded **Friday Morning Announcements Videos**. Each week clips of students were compiled into a video so all classes got to see and hear from their peers on Friday.

- Teachers handed out “**Mac Slips**” for students demonstrating our Pillars of Character, and students were entered into a weekly raffle for prizes that they could come pick up. Winners were announced and celebrated during schoolwide Friday Morning Announcements.
- Our school mascot **Mac the Lion** made appearances in videos and on Zoom bringing joy and laughter to students.
- At our **Monthly Schoolwide Virtual Assemblies** grade levels came together to provide video presentations about the monthly Pillars of Character to share with the whole school community.
- All students read our schoolwide **Shared Reading Books of the Month** based on that month’s Pillar of Character and featuring diverse literature.
- Classes went on **virtual field trips** to far corners of the world. It was so much fun that teachers went on their own staff field trip to a working farm in New Zealand.
- Our fourth and fifth grade enrichment clubs met digitally. Our **Green Team** created a Go Green Campaign with a pledge video to encourage McKinley students to help the environment.
- Our student writers and editors created five editions of our **student newspaper The McKinley Times** which were shared with the community.
- Students running for **Student Council** gave speeches to all fourth and fifth graders who then voted in a Zoom poll. Student Council met to come up with ideas for Spirt Week and events like the Valentine’s Day heart card posting.
- Weekly grade level **STEM Club** meetings brought students across classes together for fun hands-on projects facilitated on Zoom.
- Supplemental enrichment was provided to engage students and tap into students’ talents and interests. Recorded lessons were provided in **STEM** by PS Science, **Theater** by PS Arts, **TK-2 Music** by Music Rhapsody, and **PE** by our PE Coaches. Live Zoom Music classes for 3rd-5th graders was provided by our SMMUSD music teachers, and live Zoom **Visual Art** by PS Arts.
- McKinley’s School Psychologist and counseling staff led a variety of meaningful and proactive **class student workshops** and presentations including discussions about COVID and social skills during the school reopening.
- McKinley is a Common Sense certified school and had grade level assemblies on **digital citizenship** via Zoom so our students could learn about how to use technology safely during the pandemic and beyond.

McKinley was committed to providing quality Distance Learning instruction and continued to be a model school in closing the achievement gap:

- McKinley created a comprehensive **Distance Learning Guidebook** for families which was detailed at grade level parent info sessions before returning to school.
- **Distance Learning supplies bags** were provided to every student, jam packed with curriculum and materials for every student to use in their home classroom.
- **PTA funding** supported teachers’ instruction by providing supplemental resources such as laptop stands and ring lights, instructional supplies for students such as markers, watercolors, and whiteboards for home learning, funding for virtual field trips, as well as our technology software resources including Lexia and Freckle.
- Our schoolwide **progress monitoring data** (Fastbridge and Fountas & Pinnell) results during Distance Learning were comparable to in-person learning at the same time last year; we are thrilled that the assessments show no evidence of learning loss or an increased achievement gap.

- Student **attendance** during Distance Learning was exceptional, higher than typical in-person attendance.
- McKinley's school site focus of **Academic Discourse** was emphasized, and teachers utilized Zoom breakout rooms and instructional assistants to provide opportunities for students to talk to each other and engage in learning.
- Teachers learned how to teach in an entirely new way, transforming in-person lessons into an engaging digital format using newly learned technology platforms such as Zoom, SeeSaw, Google Classroom and more.
- Eleven teachers volunteered to attend additional **professional development** during their own time to learn about Project Based Learning to enhance children's learning experience. All teachers met weekly during early dismissal Wednesdays for continuous cycles of inquiry.
- McKinley's Literacy and Language Interventionist and Intervention Teacher continued to provide small group **intervention** for students needing support in ELA and Math. 72% of students in Tier III intervention have made growth in the ELA national percentile and 93% grew 1-5 F&P levels.
- **Special education** team members such as the SAI teachers, School Psychologist, SLP, OT, PT, and APE teacher continued to provide services to students in their areas of need.
- Our school counselor continued to provide individual **counseling** and intervention services, and offered lunchtime friendship social skills groups on Zoom.

When tasked with quickly developing 3 different reopening models ("Distance Learning Plus" "Hybrid" and "Reopening with Protocols") McKinley stood out in our organized, well-prepared, and thoughtful plans. McKinley was committed to all children, and administration designed unique models to keep the home group of students part of the school community.

- McKinley was one of the only schools to have a DL+ and Hybrid plan that allowed for the home group of students to remain part of their class and McKinley.
- When the school was to fully reopen, our own LLI and Instructional Coach dropped everything on short notice to step up and lead our Distance Learning groups so our students at home could stay with McKinley and have quality instruction.
- Maps, presentations, and videos were created and provided to welcome back students and explain protocols and procedures.
- Creative problem solving occurred to maintain a positive school climate while maximizing safety such as the purchase over 30 pop-up tents for outdoor learning areas, personalized paw print social distancing dots, the setup of rolling storage bins for individualized student supplies and more.
- The majority of our classified staff took on extended hours and additional roles to help ensure campus was safe and to provide active engagement and support to students.
- All old classroom furniture was removed, and classrooms received brand **new furniture** including flexible seating and desks, and new storage. The moveable furniture was arranged to enhance student safety during the reopening, and old furniture was utilized for outdoor learning areas.
- The reopened campus was full of joy. Students loved playing with friends and learning together. Students and teachers worked on rebuilding a sense of community in person. It was common to hear students say "I missed school so much" and "I'm so happy to be back!" Statements we don't take for granted and that are a testament to the happy safe space McKinley is to our children.

In summary, this list is nothing short of impressive. And these are just schoolwide events; it does not include the numerous experiences individual classrooms and students had over the course of the year. The fact that McKinley came together to provide this level of a school experience during a time of immense challenges is simply amazing. This was possible because of the teamwork, dedication, and compassion of the McKinley family. While it was a stressful and scary year, it was also a year where I have never been prouder to be a McKinley lion.

With gratitude and pride,



Ashley Benjamin, Ed.D.
Principal
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