BRUCE VENTO AND EXISTING EFFORTS

Bruce Vento Elementary School (BV) is a school of 500 students in East St. Paul. Ninety-six percent receive free or reduced lunches and 60% are English Language Learners. Fifty-four percent of the student body identify as Asian American (Hmong and Karen), 34% percent as African American, 8% as Hispanic American, and one percent as Native American. Sixty-four percent of the students are multilingual learners, and 8% receive special education services. BV has a 13-1 student-to-teacher ratio, 3 school social workers, and a behavior specialist. The surrounding neighborhood has the highest crime rate in St. Paul and many families experience educational and health disparities. Despite these challenges, BV has initiated several trauma-sensitive efforts prior to this project to increase student success in school.

EXPECTED RESULTS, SUCCESS, CHALLENGES & TIMELINE

This project models a participatory process that capitalizes on the shared strengths of the school, families, project partners and the surrounding community through reciprocal relationships. The project components have been informed through conversations with school administration and staff and include 1) the creation of a calming room for students to regulate emotional or behavioral outbursts, 2) the creation of a community garden for use by students, staff, and the surrounding community and 3) wrap-around educational programming for teaching staff and families.

Calming Room

In a new partnership with the UMN School of Design and Architecture and under the instruction of Professor Abi Asojo, 23 students in their sophomore year have worked collaboratively to design the calming room space. University students, BV school staff and project partners worked to develop a design that reflects the school’s needs, project budget, and structural bounds of the room. The calming room team is currently working to decide on the final design after the UMN students presented their final design proposals to the BV staff and project leaders. Project partners, including Ed Frickson and his team of therapists from Family Innovations, Laura Sopeth, a UMN
Occupational Therapist, and the school’s behavioral team are working with teachers and staff to develop effective strategies for using the calming room. We anticipate beginning construction in the calming room in the coming months.

**School Garden**

BV faculty and Extension staff have been collaborating with master gardeners Rochelle Robideau and May Lee and Rebecca Mino with Urban Roots to plan the community garden at BV school this spring. BV faculty are incorporating the perspectives of BV student council members plan for various vegetables and flowers for the upcoming seasons. Each grade (kindergarten-fifth) will decide on one early spring and one late fall crop to be included in the garden. Rochelle and May will assist the school in soil analysis and will recommend best tilling practices when weather permits. As an added educational benefit, the project team is developing ways to use the garden as an outdoor classroom. Bhaskar Upadyhay (UMN Faculty) has begun working with teachers and staff to integrate the garden into their current curriculum. School staff and translators plan to reach out to BV families and other community members in the neighborhood in the coming months to engage them in helping to maintain the garden.

Community Engagement The school includes a wide range of ethnic diversity, including Hmong, Karen, Somali, Latino, American Indian, and African American students. An emerging partnership with Marnita Schroedl ([Marnita’s Table](#)) will inform efforts to build interfamilial networks and positive community relationships within the neighborhood. This model includes engaging communities through creating opportunities for intentional social interaction among diverse peoples.

**Partnership Development**

This project is capitalizing on the expertise of over 55 active partners to enhance the lives Bruce Vento students and families. Partnership successes of the past few months include partner agency Family Innovations providing mental health services at Bruce Vento to serve 35 children and their families who would otherwise not be receiving services. In addition, we have partnered with the UMN School of Design on designing the calming room (see above), and are exploring future partnerships with Marnita Schroedl and Bill Allen to increase cultural connections across the school and community (see above).

**Challenges**

We have begun addressing several challenges that have emerged including: summer garden maintenance when students and teachers are not at the school; a short growing season due to cold temperatures; and plants that require longer growing times and fall harvests. Master gardeners have been helpful in addressing these challenges. BV teachers have also identified racial barriers within the community and school. To address these challenges, Bill Allen, psychologist, will provide cultural competence trainings that focus on race, racism, and developing cross-cultural responsiveness.
EVALUATION

Through a series of interviews with school staff, as well as diligent documentation of organic partner-led shifts in the project's direction (e.g. reflective journaling), we are tracking development of the community-engaged collaborations. It is still early in the project to gather baseline data for the proposed project outcomes, however as the calming room and the garden are constructed in the coming year, we will begin to gather baseline data on the project’s three proposed anticipated outcomes: 1) Increased student learning time due to the strategic use of the two environmental spaces. 2) Increased positive community perceptions of and engagement with BV. 3) Increased number of families and children in the surrounding community who have access to healthy food.

“Ms Myers didn’t quit...I hit a wall, but [Judy] introduced me to Ed Frickson director at Family Innovations and he comes in and he says “Hey, I gotta plan for you. We’ll put a mental health professional in your building who supervises 6 masters level counselors. They’ll be able to service up to 12 kids each.” ...So all our kids can have access to this therapy. We essentially have a mental health clinic in our building now.” ~Bruce Vento Principal Scott Masini

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