

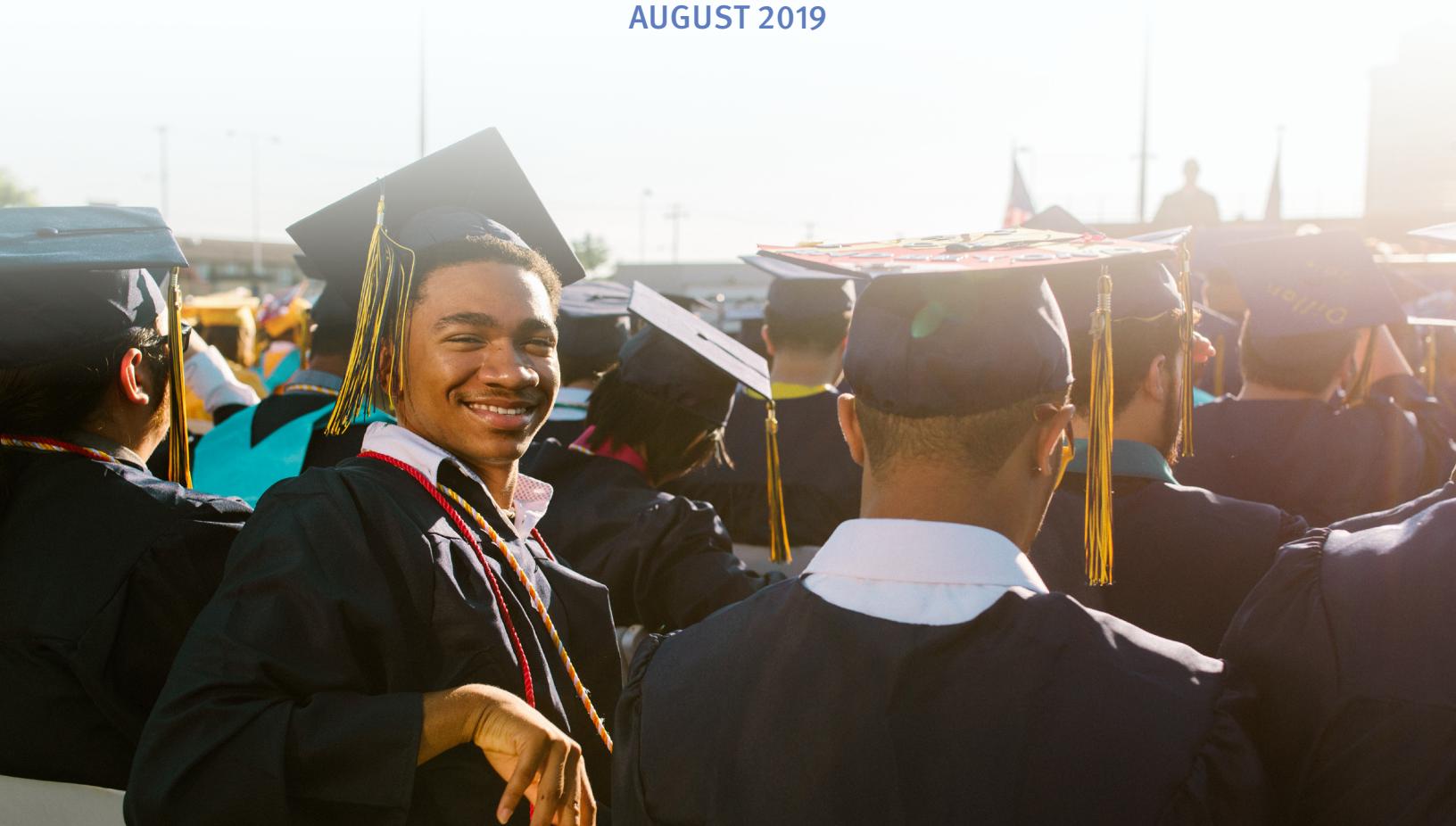


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# The Future of Learning at Battle Creek Public Schools: Year Two of the Transformation

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY TO TRANSFORM A DISTRICT

AUGUST 2019





# Overview

This report examines and reflects on year two of Battle Creek Public School District's (BCPS) bold transformational effort after a landmark grant by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) in 2017, as well as investments by other funders, to support the district's plan to attain excellence for its students. As a second chapter in this five-year endeavor, the report examines achievements, opportunities and lessons learned thus far, culled from conversations with students, parents, teachers, community partners and leaders in the district, community and foundation.

The overarching theme that emerged during year two (2018–19) of the district's transformation process is that change does not occur in a vacuum: a school district can only

be transformed in partnership with a community, requiring collaboration and communication at every level. As BCPS Superintendent Kimberly Carter describes it: "If I synthesize everything that we've gone through and come up with a way to characterize this journey, it would absolutely be about collaboration. The success of district transformation is grounded in the partnerships and relationships built outside of the district."

This report aims to shed light on both the district's efforts and the collective power of community in aiding district success, student improvement and family engagement. The lessons it provides will continue to drive change for BCPS, and ensure continued improvement. [▶ WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

## Methodology

Fenton, a strategic communications firm committed to social impact for more than 35 years, has supported the district since 2017 in its effort to leverage communications as a key component of the transformation effort. During year one of the transformation, Fenton was tasked with creating a yearly report that chronicled, or "mapped," the district's lessons learned, progress, challenges and opportunities. In December 2018 and April 2019, Fenton conducted interviews with more than 67 community stakeholders — parents, students, teachers, and district, city and foundation leaders — to glean critical insights and context on the state of change at BCPS.

This report is based on findings from these interviews as well as research from a combination of qualitative and quantitative sources, including data and analysis from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which specializes in measuring education reform efforts at school districts across

the country. For the second year in a row, AIR provided a formative and summative evaluation on the BCPS transformation process by conducting an annual teacher survey, administering parent focus groups, and interviewing administrators, teachers and staff. AIR also analyzed BCPS's student achievement and discipline data.

The report also examines preliminary results from a brand tracker survey, conducted by Burrell Communications, that measures public perceptions of BCPS and how communications and messaging are resonating with the Battle Creek community. At the time of this report, it has surveyed 156 respondents out of the targeted 276.

Finally, this report also includes a review of the district's strategic documents, communications materials and media coverage, as well as qualitative data and analysis by various educational researchers.





# Introduction

In 2017, BCPS was in the midst of an educational crisis. Years of racial and class segregation led to disinvestment in parts of the city and in the school district, resulting in a significant student enrollment decline and budget and program cuts.

BCVision, a community-driven movement to create a thriving community where people want to live, work and play, called for a study that demonstrated, with data, the inequities in the city educational system. The resulting New York University study, [Equity and Excellence in College and Career Readiness](#) (2017 NYU Study), revealed that racial bias and segregation, compounded by income inequality, had concentrated poverty in BCPS among people of color and poor white residents, perpetuating economic and racial divisions. It further revealed achievement gaps between BCPS and other Battle Creek school districts in educational metrics such as test scores, grade-level reading and graduation rates.

Following the study, WKKF invested \$51 million toward Carter's five-year vision and strategy for the district. The infusion of capital from WKKF enabled Carter and other district leaders to fast track the strategic plan Carter had laid out.

The school year of 2017–18 marked the first year of the transformation process. Carter assembled a district transformation team that included a director of district transformation, a director of student data and innovation, and district leaders for elementary and secondary school academics and parent engagement. The district made significant progress implementing new processes, hiring new staff and rolling out a number of new academic programs for students, incentives for teachers and partnerships with the community.

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**“When I describe our journey, and I think about year one, I often characterize it as being the year that we put in place baseline opportunities,” said Carter. “In year two, we are scaling up excellence and solidifying that work.”**

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# Year Two Progress

Carter's five-year plan for the district centers around Six Goals for Greatness, which district stakeholders use to mark the progress at BCPS on a bi-annual basis. During the second year of the transformation, the district realized a number of improvements and successes based on initiatives that it put in place during year one. The district also launched a number of new initiatives to sustain or scale existing efforts.

The following contains highlights of district progress in 2018–19, including new initiatives and successes.

[▶ WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

## SIX GOALS FOR GREATNESS

**Our Mission:** We engage, empower and collaborate to educate and prepare every Bearcat for college, career and life as a global citizen.

**Our Vision:** 100% Success for every Bearcat.



**1 High Academic Achievement**



**2 Healthy Organizational Culture**



**3 Human Capital Strategy**



**4 Effective and Efficient Use of Resources**



**5 Active Partnerships With Our Community**

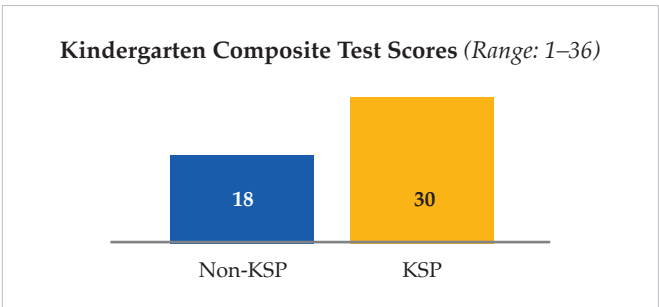


**6 World-Class Infrastructure**



# 1. HIGH ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

- Across all grades, the percentage of students meeting annual growth targets in reading increased by five percentage points (from 55% to 60%) between 2016 to 2019 and remained relatively stable in math (54% to 55%), according to student achievement data.
- Kindergarten Success Program:** For the second year in a row, students who attended the Kindergarten Success Program — a full-time free summer program hosted by BCPS — tested higher than students who did not attend and had higher attendance rates in kindergarten. Evidence of the longer-term impact, first graders who attended the summer program scored at the 45th percentile on the Northwest Evaluation Association test in reading, compared with the 28th percentile for students who did not attend.



- Elementary school:** In 2018–19, the majority of elementary school students met annual growth targets in reading and math across all elementary schools, according to student achievement data. Seventy-six percent of kindergartners met annual growth targets in math, and 77% of kindergartners met annual growth targets in reading.
- Focus on literacy:** The district continued its focus on literacy, placing 46 tutors in its K-2 classrooms and six certified reading specialists in every elementary building to support focused literacy instruction. The district revamped the reading curriculum, implementing “Accelerated Reader,” a self-paced online reading program that students can use to read and measure comprehension. Furthermore, in partnership with

Scholastic, the district is building classroom libraries of **750 to 1,500 books** in every K-8 classroom over the next three years.

- REACH enriched and accelerated program (REACH):** By the end of 2018–19, the district fully implemented new curriculum resources to reinforce a rigorous middle school learning experience in its accelerated REACH program.
- High School career academies:** In year two, the district celebrated the inauguration of career academies, becoming only the second school district in Michigan to be designated as a Ford Next Generation Learning Community, where students, staff, families and community partners co-create a curriculum that is responsive to community and business needs. Under this framework, students at the end of ninth grade, through different experiences such as career fairs, college visits and externships with different business partners, declare a pathway or a major to follow from 10th through 12th grades at either the Academy of Business, Engineering & Industrial Technology or the Academy of Health & Human Services.
- Two innovative new schools will open in the fall: **Fremont International Academy (Fremont)**, an academically rigorous magnet school with an International Baccalaureate curriculum, where all students will receive instruction in Spanish. In its first year, Fremont will offer grades K-2, adding one grade every year until it is a K-5 school. **Battle Creek STEM Innovation Center (BC STEM Innovation Center)**, a new middle school focused on science, math and engineering, will open for sixth grade and will add a grade every year until it reaches eighth grade. Students at BC STEM Innovation Center will experience hands-on project-based learning to develop engineering mindsets, design thinking and research skills.
- Changes in instruction:** According to AIR teacher surveys, teachers cited having access to more support staff, such as trained tutors and literacy specialists, enabling more focused time for instruction and targeted intervention for students.
- Nearly all teachers (98%) surveyed by AIR also reported using data sometimes or often to guide instructional planning.

# 2. HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- Training:** Forty BCPS teachers and staff were trained in restorative practices in 2018–19. According to the 2018–19 AIR teacher survey, 62% of teachers surveyed reported that they felt they had been adequately trained to deal with trauma.
- In year two, **restorative conversations** were introduced as a consequence of student misbehavior and used 791 times, according to district data. In turn, the use of warnings was reduced by half, from 3,132 to 1,594. Out-of-school suspensions decreased considerably, from 1,125 to 886.

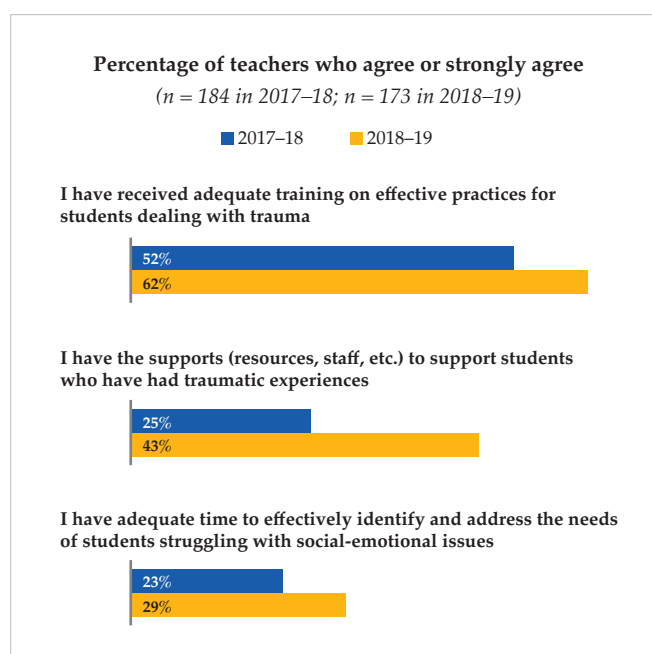
Overall, between years one and two, there was an 8% decrease (from 5,991 to 5,538) in disciplinary action incidents.

- A three-part team is now in every BCPS school to provide support for students and create a positive environment. The team includes **Bearcat coaches, family advocates and student success specialists**, who work together to support students and their families.
- This is the second year with **student success centers** implemented in all schools, third grade through 12th grade. In all elementary classrooms, **success spaces** serve as a restorative practice alternative to sending a student



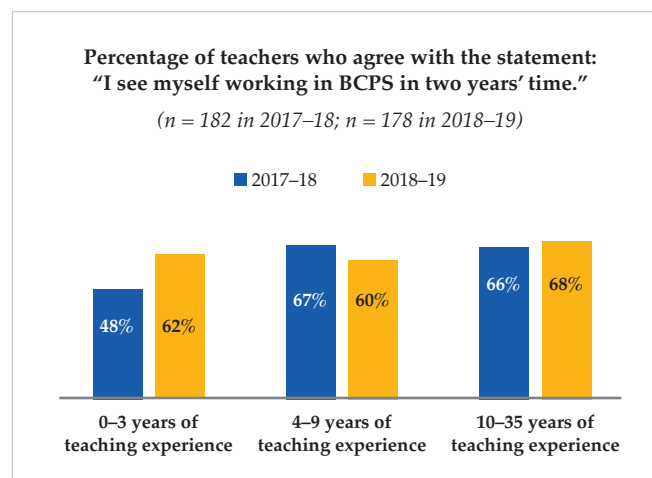
on time out or to the principal's office. According to the 2018–19 AIR teacher survey, a majority (72 out of 128) of teachers say that the student success centers are making a positive change in their schools.

- In 2018–19, 65 **Link Crew** student leaders led the way for 330 freshmen at Battle Creek Central High School (BCHS) to improve peer-to-peer connections.
- The **Bearcat Health Team** meets on a monthly basis, bringing together health, human services and law enforcement leaders from across the community to solve student and family challenges. Thus far, the team has provided wraparound services, including mental health services and in-home interventions, for more than 50 high-needs students. In year two, a major focus for the Bearcat Health Team was establishing attendance teams to address the root causes of student absence, such as transportation, laundry, food and physical or mental health.



### 3. HUMAN CAPITAL STRATEGY

- **Historic compensation increase:** At the end of the 2018–19 school year, BCPS announced a three-year contract with teachers that guarantees annual compensation increases for the first time in more than 15 years, including the reinstatement of “step” salary increases for all teachers during each of the three years, and two additional “makeup” step increases over the course of the agreement for teachers who missed step increases in the past.
- Leading up to the 2018–19 school year, the district secured general funds for a one-time 2% lump sum payment as well as a 2% salary increase to all BCPS teachers.
- **Financial incentives:** According to the AIR teacher survey, in 2018–19, 76% of surveyed teachers reported that at least one of the financial incentives offered since year one — such as performance bonuses, housing incentives or tuition reimbursements — was likely to influence whether they stayed in BCPS (an increase from 66% in 2017–18).
- **Professional learning communities:** More than three-quarters of all surveyed teachers in 2018–19 reported participating in a professional learning community. Of these teachers, 72% said they learned from their experience and 45% said they changed their teaching as a result.
- **Instructional coaches** are in each building to build teacher capacity. Fifteen out of 39 district staff interviewed by AIR specifically mentioned relying on their instructional coaches to request, receive and gain access to helpful resources and materials in 2018–19.



- **The Transformational Teacher Institute (TTI):** BCPS introduced the TTI as part of its professional development offerings. The TTI serves as an opportunity for teachers to expand their knowledge in specific areas, offering seven “institutes” that cover different areas of interest, each with eight professional development sessions. Teachers who complete eight TTI sessions receive a stipend. In 2018–19, teachers generally found the TTI sessions beneficial, and 56% of surveyed teachers reported that they participated in at least one TTI activity in 2018–19, compared to 43% in 2017–18.



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## 4. EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT USE OF RESOURCES

- The district has worked diligently to reduce expenditures to bring them in-line with revenue. In 2017, **revenues exceeded expenditures in the general fund** for the first time in over a decade, a trend that continued in 2018 (2019 numbers will be available in September). BCPS has also grown its fund balance over past two years.
- The enrollment numbers have been key to the district achieving its critical goal of financial sustainability and increasing teachers' salaries, crucial to retaining top talent.
  - As of July 2019, the district enrolled **100 more students than projected**, continuing a trend that began last year when it enrolled 128 more students than projected.
  - Nearly 150 students have enrolled at Fremont as of July 2019. Due to high demand for seats at Fremont, the district added an additional kindergarten classroom, **enrolling 26 more students than expected**. More than 65 students have enrolled at the BC STEM Innovation Center. There is a waiting list at both Fremont and the BC STEM Innovation Center.
- As of June 2019, 50% of students enrolled at Fremont and BC STEM Innovation Center are **new to the district or returning** after having left BCPS.
- At the end of year two, the enrollment increases enabled the district to guarantee multi-year teacher compensation increases for the first time in 15 years.
- The district acquired **\$2.5 million in additional revenue**, including a \$842,858 grant from the state of Michigan to support the health-oriented career academy pathway at BCCHS.

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## 5. ACTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH OUR COMMUNITY

- Early results from the 2018–19 brand tracker indicate that communications are helping to positively **shift community impressions of BCPS**. Eighty-five percent of those surveyed in 2018–19 said that communications from BCPS “instill pride in being a Bearcat,” a 20% increase from the year before. Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed in 2018–19 indicated that communications from BCPS gave the impression that the district is “changing for the better,” a 10% increase from the year before.
- **Career academies:** In partnership with Ford NGL, the district created career academies at BCCHS. More than 120 community members collaborated in establishing its vision. As part of the program, the district launched an annual Career Exploration Fair, with 37 community partners providing hands-on activities to help 330 freshmen learn more about the variety of careers available to them in the Battle Creek community. A career coach at BCCHS also engages community businesses and organizations in establishing a work-based learning continuum of experiences for students.
- The district is continuing its partnership with the **city of Battle Creek** to offer housing incentives — including matching funds on down payments or remodeling — in support of teacher recruitment and retention incentives. As of June 2019, at least 12 teachers had taken advantage of the housing incentive, according to the city.
- The district partnered with **Grace Health** to create student health centers in secondary buildings, and with the **county health department** to give every elementary school access to a school nurse.
- The **Bearcat Health Team** engages community partners from the city, county and law enforcement community for regular meetings, to ensure Battle Creek families and children have what they need to be successful.
- In May 2019, WKKE, **Grand Valley State University (GVSU)** and BCPS announced plans to provide middle and high schoolers with pathways to jobs in health, education and STEM; equip BCPS teachers with professional development and mentorship opportunities; and develop a pipeline of future teachers for BCPS.

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## 6. WORLD CLASS INFRASTRUCTURE

- Through its **infrastructure and technology plan**, BCPS intends to use instructional tools to help meet the needs of diverse learners, amplify student voices, and provide consistent and predictable learning environments.
- In years one and two, the district invested significantly — upwards of \$500,000 — in **new technology devices**, including offering student Chromebooks in some schools and providing staff with laptops.
- As part of the district's **Technology Ecosystem Vision**, it will increase its investment in improving technological infrastructure (networks, data storage, hardware and software); providing IT support; and deploying “innovation coaches” to train staff to integrate new technology into the curriculum.
- The district completed **fire and safety facility upgrades** at the Outdoor Education Center and improved the safety and security of all of buildings with the help of a 2018 Michigan State Police Competitive School Safety Grant Award in the amount of \$560,150.



# Milestones at BCPS

## YEAR 1

- WKKF Preparatory Alternative High School relaunches
- Kindergarten Success Program launches
- Bearcat coaches hired
- Parent advocates hired
- Financial incentives for teachers introduced
- New K-5 math curriculum is implemented
- Early-Middle College Program begins
- Parent University launches
- Transformational Teacher Institute begins
- Literacy specialists hired in elementary schools
- Teacher bonuses and 2% raises announced
- New partnership with National Equity Project launches
- Bearcat Health Team begins meeting

## YEAR 2

- Career academies launch at BCCHS
- First Career Exploration Fair
- “Accelerated Reader” program begins
- Restorative conversations introduced for misbehavior
- Student success centers open
- Multi-year Challenge Five attendance program launches
- Grace Health partnership adds health services
- Virtual Transformational Teacher Institute added
- GVSU partnership announced
- BC STEM Innovation Center and Fremont Academy announced
- Contract with teachers guarantees salary increases over the next three years

## YEAR 3

- Fremont Academy to open
- BC STEM Innovation Center to open for middle school
- Trauma-Informed Guidebook to be released
- Communities in Schools to launch
- GVSU partnership to begin





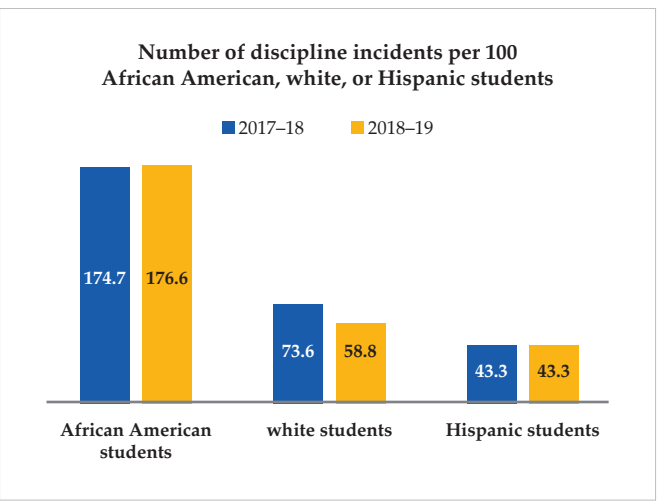
# Lessons Learned

## 1. RACIAL EQUITY IS THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE OF TRANSFORMATION.

**“I think there’s a story to tell about how you heal a community and take them through a journey of understanding how racial equity must undergird any effort to improve and transform. If you don’t deal with the root cause dynamics of racial equity, you’re not going to build a lasting transformation.” — La June Montgomery Tabron, WKCF president and CEO**

The deeply-rooted structural racism and segregation in Battle Creek, quantified by the 2017 NYU study commissioned by BCVision, motivated WKCF’s \$51 million grant to the school district. In the two years after the grant, the district continues to focus on alleviating existing inequities, addressing structural racism and establishing trust with the community.

The 2017 NYU Study found that racial and socioeconomic issues were a through line in the challenges faced by BCPS. While about 70% of people living in the BCPS catchment area are white, only 36% of BCPS students are white, which indicates that a disproportionate number of white students zoned for BCPS use school choice policies to attend neighboring districts Lakeview, Harper Creek and Pennfield. In turn, the study indicated that BCPS was seen as a “worse” school district compared to neighboring districts. Students in BCPS fared worse on achievement measures than their peers in neighboring districts, and within the BCPS district itself, white students outperformed students of color. Furthermore, common across all districts in Battle Creek, and across the country, was the fact that students of color and students with disabilities were suspended at a rate disproportionate to their populations.



Set against this background, racial equity is a guiding principle in all decisions related to the transformation.

### Leadership

In year one, BCPS restructured its partnership with the National Equity Project (NEP), an organization dedicated to helping leaders increase their awareness of equity issues and provide practical approaches to better understand people with different backgrounds, cultures and experiences. Having established core equity competency among leadership this past year, in year three the partnership is in a position to focus more intentionally on what is happening for children and families, and on changing practices and policies to create more inclusive and equitable school communities. Among the next steps the partnership may take are building strategies to advance equity awareness for staff at schools, assessing and implementing school policies that help students furthest from educational opportunity get what they need, and focusing on classroom practices so teachers can effectively engage all students in learning.

### Achievement

For a summary of the academic supports and initiatives launched by the district, see Year Two Progress (page 5). Current enrollment numbers indicate that the two rigorous, innovative schools set to launch next year, Fremont and the BC STEM Innovation Center, will have the same diversity as the rest of the district. As of July 2019, 63% of students enrolled at Fremont identify as Black or multiracial including Black, and 48% of students enrolled at the BC STEM Innovation Center identify as either Black or multiracial including Black.

Parents described a need for additional supports to help students of color in accelerated or specialized elementary or middle school programs continue to find success as they enter high school: “In the fourth grade, there is a huge diversity of students in the REACH accelerated program,” said Tiffany Blackman, a Black parent of students in BCPS elementary, middle and high schools. “So it’s disheartening to walk into the [high school] Math and Science Center and see that only one in 10 students is a minority.”

### Discipline

In years one and two, the district made a significant investment in restorative justice and trauma-informed practices (for a summary, see Year Two Progress, page 5). Early progress can be seen in the reduction of out-of-



school suspensions due to collaborative staff efforts to keep children in school, yet racial disparities in school discipline continue to persist at similar levels from year one: In 2018–19, 176.6 discipline incidents were cited per 100 Black students, compared to 58.8 disciplinary incidents per 100 white students and 43.3 disciplinary incidents per 100 Hispanic students. (For further discussion on restorative justice practices, see page 12.)

## Trust

In order to achieve full parent and community involvement in the transformation, the district has prioritized building trust with the staff, students, parents and the community. In year two, school leadership made a concerted effort to hire teachers from similar backgrounds as students and who have shared experiences with students. (For more on teacher recruitment, see page 15.) Family advocates are in place in every school to build parent relationships. (For more on parent engagement, see page 14.) The district has also made intentional efforts to respond to concerns about inclusivity. Jamie Fales, a white LGBTQ parent, said that when she enrolled her son at Post-Franklin Elementary School (Post-Franklin), the enrollment forms

did not reflect her LGBTQ family make-up. She brought it up to the school and the school board, and eventually she received a handwritten note from Carter indicating that a change would come. One year later, Fales checked the forms, and saw that many family make-ups were reflected. “That’s just one story of how you could see intentionality and responsiveness to things that need to change,” said Fales.

## Perceptions

Results from the 2018–19 brand tracker survey show that 79% of respondents view BCPS as a diverse district, a fact mentioned by parents of all races during interviews in year two as a reason why they chose to enroll their children in BCPS. For example, white father Oz Rinckley chose to bring his children to BCPS from Pennfield School District in part because of the educational value of diversity. “We really wanted our kids to have a more diverse school experience,” said Rinckley. “And we thought BCPS would be a better fit for that than Pennfield.”

### Case Study: LaTisha Grisham

LaTisha Grisham is a Black parent of four children, all of whom have attended, or are attending, BCPS schools. Since moving to Battle Creek from Detroit in 2009, Grisham’s experience with BCPS has not “always been positive,” as she put it, due to racial discrimination she believes she and her children have faced. In her telling, racial discrimination was a factor behind her son receiving disciplinary action — (“he was penalized for doing the same things that his white friends did without any penalty”) — that led to a juvenile record of larceny, and \$2,000 in fines and fees.

“At that time, I was in college, I didn’t have a job and I didn’t have money,” said Grisham. “But if I didn’t pay the fines and fees, a warrant would go out for my arrest.” When Grisham complained to the former superintendent’s office, she described the response as: “oh, you’re just an angry Black woman.” Grisham said she was retaliated against for speaking up.

In year two, Grisham’s relationship with the school district has changed considerably from the adversarial relationship she described earlier. “I met the current superintendent, Kimberly Carter. She asked me to be a voice [because] I would say things that others would not say. I took her advice.” Now a substitute teacher at BCPS, Grisham attends board meetings on the transformation and questions things like spending. Regarding Superintendent Carter, however, Grisham said: “I trust her, and I think she’s a good leader.”



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## 2. THERE IS A LINKED FATE BETWEEN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT AND THE CITY.

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**“A big part of my work, outside of being focused on the academic achievement of students, is being regularly engaged in BCVision, because we have a linked fate, the city and the school system. And so, if the city is thriving then our schools are thriving, if our schools are thriving, the city is thriving.” — BCPS Superintendent Kimberly Carter**

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**“For the city of Battle Creek to be successful, we need to keep recognizing the interconnectivity between education, economic development and talent, and keep making improvements in all of those areas.” — Battle Creek City Manager Rebecca Fleury**

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### ▶ WATCH THE VIDEO

In year one of the transformation, BCPS made consistent efforts to collaborate with the city of Battle Creek and encourage the city and the community to become involved in the changes taking place. Throughout year two, major stakeholders recognized that the fates of the city and the school are inextricably linked, and district leadership has been active in working with the city to implement strategies that are mutually beneficial. “It isn’t about a district; it’s about our kids, our families and the generations that are going to be the next wave of leaders and contributors to Battle Creek’s future,” said Matt Lynn, former vice president of community impact with United Way of the Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Region. “If you care about that, you care about BCPS and the kids that are there.”

### Revitalizing the Work Force

In year two, district leadership focused on reimagining a high schoolers’ experience by creating career academies, a revolutionary curriculum overhaul which provides practical, career-orientated skills and education to high school students in line with the jobs that are available in the community. “What’s so different about the career academies, compared to other types of secondary school reform, is the fact that we’re doing it with business partners,” said Della Uekert, BCCHS career coach. “We worked with the community to determine what we need for the next 10 years.” By linking the career academies directly to the future success and needs of local businesses, the city’s investment and involvement happened organically.

In a day-long “Career Exploration Fair,” 40 employees from 27 different Battle Creek businesses offered professional options for freshmen to consider in choosing a career academy pathway. “The Career Exploration Fair really excites me because it’s a great opportunity for students,” said Kara Beer, president of the Battle Creek Area Chamber of Commerce. “We’re showing students all the different facets to careers, what jobs are available and what industries are going to grow.”

The energy and excitement from the changes happening at BCPS have spread into the city by sparking other

investments in revitalizing Battle Creek. “What makes me optimistic is the fact that people are paying attention,” said Vania Word, a BCPS graduate who now works at SecondMuse, a community-sourced incubator for women- and minority-owned small businesses. “The big power players here in Battle Creek are listening to our needs.”

Other new and innovative revitalization efforts in Battle Creek include:

### Revitalizing Housing

The city of Battle Creek, BCPS leadership and WKKF partnered to evaluate how to attract new teachers to the area, and what improvements would have to be made to housing and infrastructure. In year one, this led to a housing credit for teachers purchasing or renovating homes in the city. Ted Dearing, Battle Creek’s assistant city manager, also described intentional efforts to rehabilitate the downtown to appeal to younger teachers and families. A visible sign of the downtown rehabilitation is the remodeling of Heritage Tower, now called The Milton. Slated to open in 2019, the building’s restoration was supported with dollars in part from WKKF and other foundations, which were used to then leverage state dollars. “Rehabilitating Heritage Tower and getting it filled with folks who are living, working and playing in downtown Battle Creek is priority number one,” said Dearing.

### Revitalizing the Economy

Community partners have made other strategic efforts to support small businesses in order to make the city more attractive and vibrant. In 2018, WKKF started a \$10 million Battle Creek Small Business Loan Fund, kicking it off with a \$1 million investment. The fund has received major contributions from the Kellogg Company, Battle Creek Unlimited (the city’s economic development partner) and The Miller Foundation. To administer the fund, WKKF partnered with Northern Initiatives, a nonprofit that provides loans to small businesses and entrepreneurs in Michigan, and [SecondMuse](#). As of May 2019, Northern Initiatives loaned nearly \$1.5 million to nine local businesses, four of which are new businesses.

In another example, Battle Creek Unlimited offered \$200,000 to incentivize a small business to build a brewery in downtown Battle Creek. The request drew national attention, and the ultimate winner, New Holland Brewing Company, is expected to employ 50 people and be a “turning point for downtown Battle Creek,” the brewery’s founder and president, Brett VanderKamp, said in a public statement. The brewery [plans](#) a roughly \$1 million renovation of a vacant location, which it will turn into a distillery, garden, restaurant and retail space.

Other new loan initiatives include a microloan fund, handled by the city and Battle Creek Unlimited; the Real Estate Improvement Fund, managed by Battle Creek Unlimited; and the Small Business Development Fund, administered by the city manager’s office.



## Case Study: Café Rica

Brothers Jackson and Tristan Bredhoft grew up in Battle Creek and in 2016 began a company that initially sold imported coffee exclusively online. They saw a gap in the Battle Creek market, inspiring them to explore opening a coffee shop downtown. “I’ve always loved downtown Battle Creek,” said Jackson. “I would like to see all the storefronts downtown filled by businesses.”

But a barrier to that dream was money. Rental costs for storefronts in downtown Battle Creek can be prohibitively high, and property owners often require tenants to pay high renovation costs to meet fire and safety regulations. “That’s a lot of upfront money for a small business to pay,” said Jackson. “I think it prevents many ideas from even getting off the ground in the first place.”

The city of Battle Creek recognized the barriers facing small businesses and began working to eliminate them. “We’re trying to provide incubation spaces so that business owners can have firm foundations before moving into storefronts,” said City Manager Rebecca Fleury. Through its Small Business Loan Fund, the city purchased and renovated a “retail food service incubator” downtown and offered a lease at below market rent. The Bredhoft brothers took advantage of the offer, and in 2019 Café Rica opened its doors.

“I feel like our business has already been successful just because it’s one place downtown that is open seven days a week,” said Tristan. “Every time someone comes by on a Sunday, their face lights up when they see that we’re open. We’re putting new, positive energy into the community.”

## 3. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IMPROVES SCHOOL CLIMATE AND REQUIRES COMMUNITY SUPPORT.

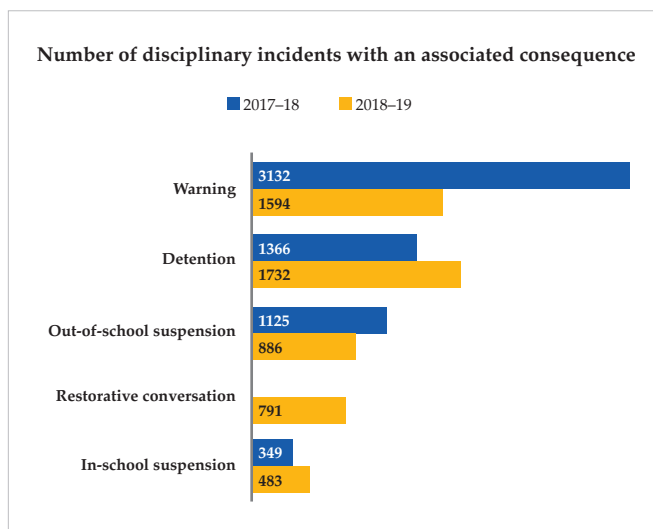
**“We’re shifting away from a model of sending kids home after they misbehave to working to keep them in the classroom. This is the change that I’m most excited about, but it’s also the hardest because you have to get everyone involved — including the teachers, the parents and the other students.” — BCCHS Principal Noah Hollander**

In years one and two, the district put in place a range of strategic and integrated restorative justice policies. BCPS hired new staff, including Bearcat coaches, family advocates and student success specialists. Student success centers were implemented in all schools, grades three through 12, and success spaces were placed in all elementary classrooms. The district also made intentional efforts to train teaching staff in restorative justice practices. Overall, in 2018–19, the percentage of teachers who feel prepared to deal with trauma rose on all fronts: 62% of teachers feel that they have been adequately trained on effective practices to deal with trauma, a 10% rise from the previous year. Forty-seven percent of teachers (compared to 25% the year prior) say they have the supports (e.g., resources and staff) to help students who have had traumatic experiences. [▶ WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

**Even in the early stages of the transformation, there are important positive signs that restorative justice approaches are improving school climate.**

There was a slight decrease (8%) in disciplinary action incidents in 2018–19 compared to 2017–18. Although the overall decline in disciplinary actions is slight, there are

meaningful changes in the nature of disciplinary actions. For example, after “restorative conversations” were introduced and used in 791 incidents, the use of warnings consequently fell by half, from 3,132 to 1,594. Out-of-school suspensions also decreased considerably last year, from 1,125 to 886, due in part to a collaborative effort by staff throughout the district to keep children in school. “I know the way that we issue discipline at the bus garage has changed completely now,” said Jaquana Peterson, a school bus driver and parent. “We’re trying to keep the kids in school, so the schools are doing a lot more of the discipline rather than bus drivers kicking kids off the bus for behavior.”



**A major lesson that emerged during year two is that building support for restorative justice practices requires continuous outreach to students, parents, teachers and the community.**

Despite the positive outcomes of restorative justice, some teachers, students and parents continue to express skepticism about the effectiveness of these practices. Only one-third of teachers report that school safety and school discipline improved in 2018–19, according to the AIR teacher survey. In its analysis, AIR also noted that, “There is an apparent rift among [teachers] who seek to emphasize a restorative practice approach to behavioral challenges, and others who are convinced there are not enough consequences for

disruptive behavior.” Students and parents in interviews also questioned the efficacy of the new restorative justice practices.

“We still have to get everyone to understand what we’re trying to accomplish with restorative justice practices,” Hollander acknowledged. Hollander said the district has started to have conversations with teachers to inform them about the need for restorative justice practices, as well as to provide them with research that demonstrates its effectiveness. In year three, the district will seek to achieve consistent implementation and provide further clarity by releasing a completed draft of the Trauma-Informed Schools Guidebook, which will serve as a comprehensive guide to the positive school environment and behavior support structures at BCPS.

### Case Study: Northwestern Middle School

Northwestern Middle School (Northwestern) has been struggling on a number of fronts for several years. In 2017, the state of Michigan placed the school on the state’s list of priority schools for low academic achievement, triggering a forced “turnaround” (i.e., firing or reassigning) of 50% of the school’s staff. According to district attendance data, 53% of students at Northwestern were chronically absent in 2018–19. Improving academics, attendance and school climate at Northwestern is a priority for district leadership. In year three, work is underway to improve school climate by adding behavioral supports, including additional Bearcat coaches and new resilience coaches, and a dean of culture and climate.

Even in a school grappling with a complex array of challenges, the restorative justice practices put in place over the past two years already have had a positive impact, based on interviews with students, parents and teachers at Northwestern. All people interviewed said that in year two, school climate had improved.

“Last year was kind of a struggle,” said Amber Burbank, parent of a Northwestern student and a custodian at Northwestern. “This year, the school started the success center, and it’s actually been good.” Burbank went on to say that a lot of the students “loved” the student success specialists. “They help the kids when they are having problems, and they try to take the time to hear kids out, and I think that’s good for the kids.”

“Our school got a lot nicer this year,” said Quincey Scott, an eighth grader at Northwestern. “Students would try to fight with the teachers rather than try to learn in class. But now they’re actively trying to learn in class.”

## 4. COLLABORATION BRINGS TO LIGHT BETTER WAYS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS.

**“Families have to prioritize things. If you’re a family who is in trauma or crisis, school is not going to be at the top of your list.”** — *Monique Cheeks, director of student services and pupil accounting at BCPS*

An important strategy put in place during years one and two involved building networks for district, city and community leaders to collaboratively address structural issues that hindered student achievement. Opening up conversations between stakeholders led to increased awareness about issues facing children and families. “We’re now learning how mental health plays into constant truancy, illnesses, or bad behavior,” said Fleury. “We’re very committed to succeeding in this new area.”

In year one, the district created the Bearcat Health Team through a partnership with 11 agencies and organizations in

Battle Creek and Calhoun County. The group brings together a juvenile court judge, a county prosecutor, a police chief, the head of the public health department, mental health services, social safety net programs, hospitals, local funders, district leaders and others under the umbrella of BCVision to provide a 360-degree system of support for children and families in the district. The team meets monthly to discuss and problem-solve challenges, and, in year two, it provided wraparound services (e.g., mental health services and in-home interventions) to 50 students.

“The Bearcat Health Team takes a holistic approach to supporting a student,” said Arelis Diaz, director of the office of the president at WKCF. “It’s not just the school that needs to be successful for the child to be successful. It’s, does the child have the clothes that they need? Do they have a safe place to sleep at night? There’s a recognition that those supports lead to academic gains.”



## Improving student achievement requires the entire community.

Data from AIR demonstrates that school attendance is related to higher academic achievement in BCPS, and, in year two, the district made improving attendance a priority. The district launched a “Challenge Five” campaign, implementing school-level improvement plans and attendance teams, exploring the root causes of absenteeism and reaching out to help families address those causes. Family advocates logged more than 11,000 contacts and helped alleviate challenges including transportation, laundry and health. A corresponding communications campaign included social media, yard signs, billboards, public banners, posters in schools and around town, and early-stage community outreach on the importance of attendance. District-level data from the year show improvements: 36% of students were chronically absent (missing more than 10 days of school) in 2018–19, a nine percentage point decrease from 2017–18.

Nonetheless, attendance still remains a significant issue at BCPS. According to district data, 53% of students are chronically absent at Northwestern, and 47% of students are chronically absent at BCCHS. The district recognizes it needs deeper community relationships for its attendance campaign to address student needs. In year two, the Bearcat Health Team was the main vehicle for distributing Challenge Five resources. In year three, the district will work to more deeply engage local businesses, health professionals, faith leaders and nonprofit organizations in attendance efforts. At present, the district is planning on meeting with community partners one-on-one; enlisting a broader range of groups with ties to the Spanish- and Burmese-speaking communities; and identifying new champions for attendance outside of district leaders.

### Case Study: Transient Housing

City Manager Rebecca Fleury said that the city of Battle Creek didn’t realize how significant transient housing issues were until recently, when a city commissioner raised concerns about criminal activity taking place at hotels and motels around the city. The city began paying attention to the high numbers of hotels and motels within city limits. “Once we started looking at that, we started to see school buses pull up to hotels and motels,” said Fleury.

During a community readers’ day set up by the district, Fleury and other city department leaders were invited to Post-Franklin to read to a group of kindergartners. “We each had one child out of the four in our group tell us they lived in a motel,” said Fleury.

Since then, Fleury and the city have made housing a focus and begun inspecting motel areas for habitability issues for children and families. “If we were to just look at the hotels and motels from an enforcement perspective — which we could do as a city — we might end up putting families on the street,” said Fleury. “But we’re taking a holistic approach and working with a homeless coalition to take a census of people living in these facilities to determine how to connect them with better housing options.”

## 5. ENGAGING FAMILIES REQUIRES RESOURCES AND FLEXIBILITY.

**“Once we have our families engaged and the families’ trust, everything comes together. If you meet a family’s needs one-on-one, the parents feel like the child is going to be successful, the parents play a bigger role in the child’s school, the child feeds off of the parents’ involvement, and you see the child do better here in school. It’s a circle.”**

— Post-Franklin Family Advocate Mikael Westry

In years one and two, the district’s leadership team created a matrix of communication efforts to reach parents, working with Fenton and Burrell Communications to develop communications strategies and processes and instill intentional communications and relationship-building throughout the district. Multiple points of outreach were established between families, including through Facebook,

calls, text messages and newsletters. “The transformation process for Battle Creek Public Schools is everywhere,” said Fales, a parent. “I can tell that there’s been intentional increase in social media. You hear it on the radio, on TV and at the movies. You see it on billboards. You get stuff in the mail.”

### Despite targeted communications, increasing parent engagement is an ongoing challenge.

In year two, only 50% of English- and Spanish-speaking parents in AIR’s focus groups reported awareness of the new BCPS initiatives, including Fremont, BC STEM Innovation Center, the high school career academies and the “Believe in the Change” campaign. “In year two, parent involvement is a work-in-progress,” said Crescenda Jones, principal of Ann J. Kellogg Elementary School. “This year, for the first time in

a long time, we have five parents signing up to be reading buddies. In years past, it was always retired teachers. The movement is slow, but I do see progress.”

Among the ways that the district is working to deepen relationships with families and increase parent engagement are:

### Family Advocates

To help eliminate barriers for families and create tighter relationships, the district placed 10 family advocates, one in every building. Family advocate Melissa Butler described how a longstanding distrust makes some parents disinclined to engage with the district. “Some of the challenges that are still going on are the mindset of families,” said Butler. “A lot of families tell me that ‘I don’t trust the school’ or ‘I don’t feel I can trust the school.’ I think that’s where having family advocates in the building can help a lot.” To date, family advocates have coordinated 14 literacy nights for pre-K through grade five, and 10 family engagement events for K-12. They have made more than 11,000 documented family contacts, created clothing closets in nine K-12 buildings and signed up 63 families to participate in the new “Parent University.”

### Non-English Language Outreach

After year one, Carter prioritized improving two-way communications to non-English language speaking families. A particularly tricky issue facing the district is that Burmese-American parents report that their language consists of 21 different dialects, approximately nine of which are spoken by families around Battle Creek. In year two, Burmese-speaking staff were added in schools and investments were made in Spanish and Burmese language translators. Based on parent focus groups conducted by AIR, seven out of eight Burmese parent participants specifically mentioned the positive role that the district’s Burmese family liaison plays in supporting their communication with the schools.

“I see some changes,” said Jennifer Pui, an education engagement coordinator at the Burma Center. “BCPS has some Burmese staff in the schools, which is awesome. I think it will be really helpful for the Burmese families to have even more Burmese staff in the school district.” In year three, BCPS will continue to strengthen its communication and engagement with non-English speaking families to build trust and participation with parents.

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## 6. CONTINUALLY EXPLORE WAYS TO SUPPORT AND RETAIN TEACHERS.

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**“Between this year and last year, I went from sleeping in classes to caring about school because I started making teacher-student bonds. I actually had teachers that pushed me, cared about me, asked about my day and put effort into getting to know me. Now I get why school is put in place.”**

— BCCHS 10th Grader Alanna Mitchell

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An investment in principals, staff, support staff and especially teachers is critical to the district’s success, and central to the transformation strategy. In year one, Superintendent Carter and district leadership partnered with the city and other entities to release a host of incentives to draw teachers and encourage them to remain in the district. [▶ WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

Like many districts in Michigan, teacher turnover is an issue at BCPS. The overall teacher turnover rate in Michigan is 19%, and in urban Michigan districts the turnover rate is 24%. In 2018, the BCPS teacher turnover was about 22% — 56 teachers left the district, 37 of whom resigned in August, weeks before the start of the school year. During the 2018–19 school year, there were approximately 25 long-term substitute teachers at BCPS.

The district worked creatively and aggressively to market itself to new teachers, and **the response to the new staff**

**has been positive.** In 2018–19 interviews, teachers praised efforts by the district to hire teachers who came from similar backgrounds as students and who had shared experiences with students. “There must be some type of an intentional focus by our district administration to recruit and retain teaching staff and ancillary staff that look like, think like and live with our kids,” said Tyler Giland, a BCCHS teacher.

The district also worked creatively to retain teachers in Battle Creek, offering numerous incentives to offset their inability to support raises across the board. For example, **the district offered a housing incentive** in year one to entice teachers and staff to not only settle in Battle Creek, but also to help ensure they were able to contribute to revitalizing the community beyond their role as teachers. So far, 12 teachers have taken advantage of the housing incentive. “I was thrilled to hear about the housing incentive,” said Shelley Samples, a teacher who took a \$20,000 pay cut to move to Battle Creek and teach at BCPS. The district is continuing to adjust and shape the housing incentive in response to teacher feedback. Last month, the district announced that it would host a housing tour over the summer for teachers to see the available housing options, and it is exploring new ways to revamp the housing incentive to appeal to an increasingly broad group of teachers.



**Although teacher turnover is still high in BCPS, it has fallen over the past two years.** Approximately 43 teachers left in 2018–19, down from 50 in 2017–18 and 60 in 2016–17. Moreover, in the 2018–19 AIR survey, 62% of teachers who joined the district in the past three years reported that they intend to stay — an increase from 2017–18, when 48% said they intend to stay.

Teachers who left most often attributed their departures to high stress, low pay and having to manage significant student disciplinary challenges. According to AIR, in 2018–19, morale became worse for one-third of teachers, stayed the same for 43% of teachers, and improved or substantially improved for 24% of teachers. The survey found that a possible cause for low morale is anxiety over the number of programs added: 63% of teachers agreed that their school was adopting too many different programs and practices in the AIR 2018–19 teacher survey. The district acknowledged that it had encountered a learning curve in communicating new policies and practices to teachers. “At first the teachers had the feeling that we were putting the burden on them, when the goal was actually to allow them to have a little more say,” said Principal Hollander.

At the end of the 2018–19 year, BCPS announced two significant new supports for teachers that are intended to help with teacher retention. Due to higher than projected enrollment, which increased revenue, the district announced **a historic three-year contract that guarantees compensation increases** for teachers for the first time in more than 15 years, including the reinstatement of “step” salary increases for all teachers during each of the three years, and two additional “makeup” step increases over the course of the agreement for teachers who missed step increases in the past. The district also announced a major form of support for teachers through a **teacher mentoring program in partnership with GVSU**. GVSU will provide teachers, especially new teachers, mentorship and support in the classroom. “The partnership with GVSU seeks to provide new teachers with some one-on-one support,” said Carter. Through the partnership, GVSU will help build a pipeline of new teachers for the district to hire.





## Year Three: Looking Ahead

In year two, the district addressed some of the more complex challenges it faces, including overhauling school discipline; attracting new families to the district; addressing negative community perceptions; and reforming its high school educational program with career academies. With the support and cooperation of stakeholders throughout the city, these efforts were able to launch and find early successes. The lessons learned during the first and second year of the transformation will continue to guide the district's work into year three.

A major focus in year two involved the introduction of restorative justice practices into the district. "We recognize that if we don't have the social and emotional piece, the academic piece isn't going to matter because a lot of our students aren't going to be able to access it," said Hollander.

In year three, the district will renew its focus on academic rigor. "We did a lot of amazing things by putting in place support, practices and new opportunities," said Carter. "Now we really need to focus on the instructional practices in the classroom."

The new initiatives set to launch in the third year include:

- The district's partnership with **GVSU** will provide additional support and opportunities for teachers, building a pipeline of new teachers and furthering the academic opportunities for students.
- The first year of the new **BC STEM Innovation Center** will begin in the fall, with upwards of 60 students, and additional grades will be added each year until eighth grade.

- The first year of the newly re-opened **Fremont** will begin in the fall with grades K-2, with additional grades to be added until fifth grade.
- The **career academies** will be phased into the curriculum for every grade at BCCHS.
- Teachers will receive the first of three **guaranteed compensation increases**, as part of the historic contract signed by the district at the end of 2018–19.
- The district will build a **community-supported attendance campaign** by engaging local businesses, health professionals, faith leaders and nonprofit organizations. The district also contracted with Attendance Works, which will help pinpoint root causes for absenteeism and provide effective interventions.
- The district will launch the **Communities in Schools** initiative, which will bring community resources into schools to remove barriers for vulnerable students and leverage evidence, relationships and local resources to drive achievement results.
- The district will release the full **Trauma-Informed Schools Guidebook**, which will serve as a comprehensive guide for staff to the positive school environment and behavior support structures at BCPS.
- The district will launch a **new website** that provides important information to students, parents, families and other audiences in an accessible and equitable manner.





# Year Two Progress in BCPS



Over  
**50 students**

have received wraparound support through the **Bearcat Health Team**, a cross-system collaborative team that meets monthly to discuss and problem-solve student and family challenges



**46 tutors**

placed in our K-2 classrooms and **certified reading specialists** placed in every elementary building to support focused literacy instruction for young readers



**10 instructional coaches**  
attended

**185**  
**professional learning  
community sessions**

**19**

students enrolled in the **Early-Middle College** program, an increase from last year



**10**

**family engagement events**  
took place for grades K-12



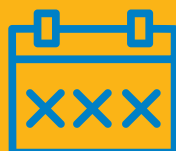
**13 professional  
development sessions**  
facilitated by coaches in 2018–19



**27 community  
partners**

**239 fewer**

out-of-school suspensions occurred in the 2018–19 school year



helped launch an annual **career exploration fair** to provide hands-on activities that help students learn more about future careers available to them in the community



**40** **staff members** including Bearcat coaches, student success specialists, behavior interventionists and counselors trained in **facilitating restorative justice practices**



**100**

more students than projected enrolled for 2019–20

**Nine**  
buildings have  
**clothing closets**  
for grades K-12



Family advocates coordinated

**14**

**literacy nights**

for Pre-K through grade 5



Over

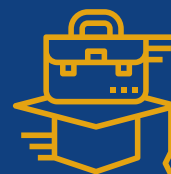
**11,000**

**family contacts**

logged by family advocates who help families alleviate challenges like transportation, laundry and health

The district is partnering with Scholastic to build  
**classroom libraries of**  
**750–1,500**  
**books**

in every K-8 classroom over the next three years



**315**

freshmen attended **career panels** offered by career academies this year, with

**40**

employees from

**27**

different businesses serving on the panels

**63 families** signed up to participate in the new **Parent University**







# 63

## new teachers

joined BCPS in the 2018–19 school year



# Three

## crisis prevention trainers

added who carried out

# six

## trainings

with

# 36

## new teachers

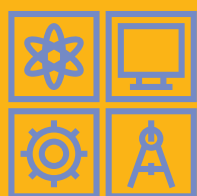
trained in crisis prevention

# 65

## Link Crew leaders



serving as mentors to 330 freshmen, building peer-to-peer connections to improve school climate



# 65

## middle school students

enrolled to attend the first year of the new **Battle Creek STEM Innovation Center** in the fall



# 1,250

## new followers

on the BCPS Facebook page

# 21

staff members working in the

## Kindergarten Success Program

with **103 students**



# \$2.5

## million

in new revenue



# 25

## internal staff e-newsletters

shared in 2018–19,

increasing the **average number of weekly email opens to 379**



W.K.  
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