

# A STUDENT- AND FAMILY-CENTERED SCHOOL

*Community School Lessons from Bridges Academy*



Located in East Oakland, Bridges serves nearly 430 students, the majority of whom are Spanish speakers. Students who are considered socio-economically disadvantaged comprise 98% of the population and English Learners make up 83%. The school also hosts one of Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) bilingual programs. In 2016, Bridges applied for and was awarded district support to become a full-service community school.

## SEPTEMBER 2020

COMPANION BRIEFS IN THIS SERIES FEATURE COMMUNITY SCHOOL LESSONS FROM:

- **Elmhurst United Middle School & New Highland RISE Community Elementary School**
- **REACH Academy**

Over the past three years, Bridges has implemented an array of strategies to remove barriers to learning and increase student success. These strategies—collaborative leadership, strategic partnerships, and integrated student supports—undergird OUSD’s community schools approach, and have profoundly reshaped the school community. They have also allowed Bridges to make notable headway in key school and district priority areas: redressing student attendance, increasing access to health and wellness supports, engaging families, and building school systems.

In addition to positive shifts in school culture and climate and progress on attendance, Bridges has increased its ELA and Math scores over 20 points, and its suspension rates have decreased to 0.8%.

This brief highlights lessons shared by Principal Anita Comelo and her Community School Manager (CSM) Rosana Covarrubias, on the transformation of their school.

## **BACKGROUND**

Principal Anita Comelo has been associated with OUSD since the 1990s, working as a classroom teacher, a Teacher on Special Assignment (TSA), in the district office, as assistant principal, and finally, as principal at Bridges. Her roots at Bridges are also deep; Comelo taught at Melrose Elementary (the school site that became Bridges) and completed her time as assistant principal at the middle school Bridges feeds into.

When Comelo started at Bridges as principal, the school was rocking from changes. The school had enjoyed unusual stability with a long-serving principal and little teacher turnover; however, with the change in principal many long-term staff also left and, Comelo soon found, much of the institutional memory had left as well.

As a first-year principal, Comelo was overwhelmed:

*My first year was pretty crazy. The school had been destabilized, due to the previous principal leaving. A number of teachers left as well, so there was a lot of turnover. We had a lot of climate and culture issues. We also had a new special education class on campus for kids with high levels of trauma, so there were many behavior challenges. And we only had one TSA budgeted, for technology, so there was no help for me outside the classroom. We had two new kindergarten classrooms added at the last moment. I started the year with three classrooms with teacher vacancies. It all added stress beyond just my first year as principal.*

These challenging circumstances prompted Comelo to consider innovative approaches to stabilizing the school community. When the district community schools grant became available in 2015, Comelo applied, and Bridges was awarded the grant.

With the grant in hand, Comelo recommended Rosana Covarrubias for the position of CSM. Covarrubias had been working at Bridges for half a decade, first as an intervention specialist and, eventually, as outreach coordinator. Covarrubias’s skills, plus her existing relationships with students and families and knowledge of the school community, made her well-suited for the CSM role. Covarrubias was hired, and together with their colleagues, the two school leaders began the work of transforming the community school

## A FOCUS ON ATTENDANCE

Attendance has been a pressing issue across OUSD, impacting everything from student learning to school funding. Over the last five years, the Office of Community Schools and Student Services (CSSS) has worked with its CSMs in all 42 of the district’s community schools to support site-level approaches to improving attendance. Community schools take a comprehensive approach to attendance, focusing on addressing the barriers that keep students from school and working collaboratively across the school community to engage stakeholders in creating positive attendance practices.

One of Bridge’s first priorities as a community school was addressing the high levels of chronic absence. According to Covarrubias, “Chronic absence is pretty high here at Bridges. And the number one reason I would say is illness.” Covarrubias established an attendance team that included the attendance specialist and principal.



In addition to working on increasing student access to health and wellness services, the team developed multiple strategies to engage school stakeholders in improving student attendance.

New practices, such as an annual attendance carnival, awards for strong classroom attendance, and a prominent display recognizing students with strong attendance have engaged families in their student’s attendance. Covarrubias shared:

*I think it’s been helping motivate families and students to see their names on the wall. Also, before the COVID closures, we started doing things like putting up the daily attendance numbers—how many students were present, tardy, and absent, and I would take a photo and send that home to the families. Those are numbers we’re seeing every day on our end. Getting that information back out to families was really powerful.*

Providing families with access to school data has become an essential strategy at Bridges. Communicating and sharing information with families has been one of the cornerstones of the attendance initiative, and is aligned with community school efforts to engage families.

Bridges also implemented several teacher-driven practices to support student attendance. For example, at the beginning of the year, teachers receive a list of students who had experienced attendance issues in the past year. During parent-teacher conferences the first few weeks of school, teachers address attendance, proactively talking with families about expectations and needs.

Covarrubias explained:

*[Principal Anita] suggested that we combine attendance meetings with parent-teacher conferences in the beginning of the year. I hadn't thought about using and leveraging that time when teachers are already meeting with families, doing assessments, getting to know the students and families for the first time. It gives them an opportunity to say, 'Hey, we know this happened last year, let's touch base and get off on the right foot, and feel comfortable enough to come to me if these issues start happening again.*

By working proactively to engage with families and start a conversation, teachers are better able to address and support attendance issues before they become problematic.

Engaging with families as partners, so they are informed and empowered to support their children's educational success, is a priority area for all OUSD community schools.

Bridges' approach reflects this commitment to creating spaces for meaningful family participation in their student's academic success.

Teachers have been supportive of the attendance team strategies. They regularly use the attendance tracker and protocols for discussing attendance with families provided by the attendance team. Many have integrated attendance strategies into their classroom routines, with positive results. Comelo recalls:

*I remember I was observing in one classroom, where the teacher would put the names of kids on the board who are absent, and as the kids would come in, she would just take them off. And so, there was one kid's name left on the board who hadn't arrived yet. And this kid arrived, and the whole class just jumped up in joy and went and hugged him. It was so interesting to see—especially because we work hard to make sure attendance isn't perceived as a negative thing.*

These collaborative approaches to addressing student attendance are a hallmark of the community schools initiative, and a key priority area for OUSD community schools. In early AY2019-20, OUSD had its first district-wide attendance mini-conference, and Bridges was asked to present on their school's experience.

Covarrubias recalls, “It’s just always reassuring to hear that you’re not alone and that other schools are facing similar challenges and getting different strategies that work for them.” One of the strengths of OUSD’s community schools model is that individual community school sites are able to meet and share best practices with other schools exploring innovative responses to similar challenges.

Since the onset of COVID-19 and shelter in place, attendance practices at Bridges have shifted. During distance learning, teachers are in constant contact with families. The school collects daily data of attendance and shares it with teachers. Teachers are also incentivized with rewards to contact students and maintain high attendance and engagement in learning. The attendance team works hard in problem-solving issues, such as technology, that might keep students from engaging in learning. As a community school, Bridges has the relationships, staffing, and systems in place to continue supporting students and families, even amidst unprecedented and trying circumstances such as the current pandemic.

## **A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS**

Since its inception, the OUSD community schools initiative has prioritized transforming discipline policies to reflect a restorative, rather than punitive, approach. At school sites, this work often entails offering increased student supports (e.g., mental health supports, tiered interventions), introducing new practices (e.g., PBIS, restorative justice), and building staff capacity.

When Comelo started at Bridges, she saw widespread discipline issues as a top priority. Covarrubias recalled, “You could just tell that a change was needed. There were kids kicking the walls and making holes. There was graffiti in the hallways... It was bad.”

In prior years, the school had been using a citation system to manage student behavior. If students acted out—for example, not keeping their hands to themselves, or getting into a fight—the supervising adult wrote them a citation. If the student got a citation, they would have to sit on a bench outside the principal’s office, often during recess. Comelo recalls that there were upwards of 12 students with multiple suspension incidents in her first year as principal. According to Covarrubias,

*We had some students who, by the end of the year, had spent 100, 200 minutes on the bench. And just looking at the whole thing, those kids who were really being active, they actually needed that recess time but we were making them sit on the bench. So, we were really disappointed in that and really wanted to make a shift.*

Comelo and Covarrubias saw the behavior issues directly linked to student experiences of trauma, and they worked to obtain more mental health supports on campus. After two years, they were able to arrange a partnership with Alameda County Services for Children’s Health to get a full-time mental health counselor on site.

The school therapist manages a caseload of 15 students, as well as leads small social groups or group work. Given the tremendous need for mental health supports at the school, says Covarrubias, “We’re always having to prioritize ... looking at students and seeing how their behavior is affecting their academics, prioritizing who would benefit from having a therapist on site.”

The mental health staff sit on the school’s Coordination of Services Team (COST), so Covarrubias and other key school personnel are able to regularly check in with the mental health professionals to ensure they’re aware of how best to support the student, and address any follow-up needed. The COST team also evaluates existing caseloads and referrals. Due to COST team intervention with mental health support and ramping up Special Education services for students who need it, suspension rates decreased dramatically and teacher retention rates increased, leading to a more stable school climate.

Community schools provide a framework for understanding the needs of the whole child. Within this framework, behavior issues are addressed through comprehensive student supports, and school-wide practices.

Partnerships with agencies such as Alameda County Services provide services, and systems, such as COST, ensure that students are connected to the supports they need. In tandem with establishing a mental health support team, Comelo also worked to establish more broad-based strategies to support positive student behavior.

Comelo was able to designate a TSA as culture/climate lead, to implement PBIS across the school. “Since we got that up and running, it really changed our school culture and climate, along with mental health services,” said Covarrubias. Practices like PBIS have equipped most adults at the school with tools to guide students’ behavior through positive reinforcement. “It’s really changed the mindset of the adults,” reports Comelo. Initially, some of the staff were resistant to shifting away from the existing citation system. However, the culture/climate team persisted, and slowly, began implementing changes.

“What really helped during those first couple years was offering regular culture/climate updates at our weekly Wednesday PD meetings. Every week, the staff were hearing updates, even if it was only 15 to 20 minutes,” recounts Covarrubias. Now, PBIS is widely used and accepted across instructional staff.



Another element of shifting culture was communicating with students to make expectations clear and consistent. Says Comelo:

*We really need to teach children what the expectations are, not assume that they know how to behave. I get the argument all the time, 'They know better, they're doing this on purpose.' But no, we really had to explicitly tell them what we expect ... how we expect them to be in the cafeteria, very specific behavior, such as when you stand up, when you raise your hand, what you do with your trash. We needed to take responsibility when something was not working.*

Together with the culture/climate team, Comelo collected and analyzed data about which areas students and teachers were having difficulty, and then came up with practices, systems, or professional development to support. She states, "We called in expertise from outside. We did trauma informed practices. We did de-escalation strategies. We did strategies around building relationships and that being the bedrock of any classroom management, Tier 1 systems, how to positively reinforce."

The team also analyzed their existing culture/climate supports and created explicit processes for determining when students might need Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports. The integration of trauma-informed practices and subsequent shift in school culture/climate would not have been possible without widespread teacher support and buy-in.

One of Comelo's strategies to ensure the success of these efforts has been engaging teachers in the planning and design. She explains:

*We've always tried to include staff feedback. When we're working on addressing an issue, we always ask for feedback. Like on recess. We asked the staff, 'What would it look like to do the best recess ever? What would it feel like? What would you see on the yard? What would you hear?' We're always trying to present and get teacher buy-in by them being part of that creation process.*

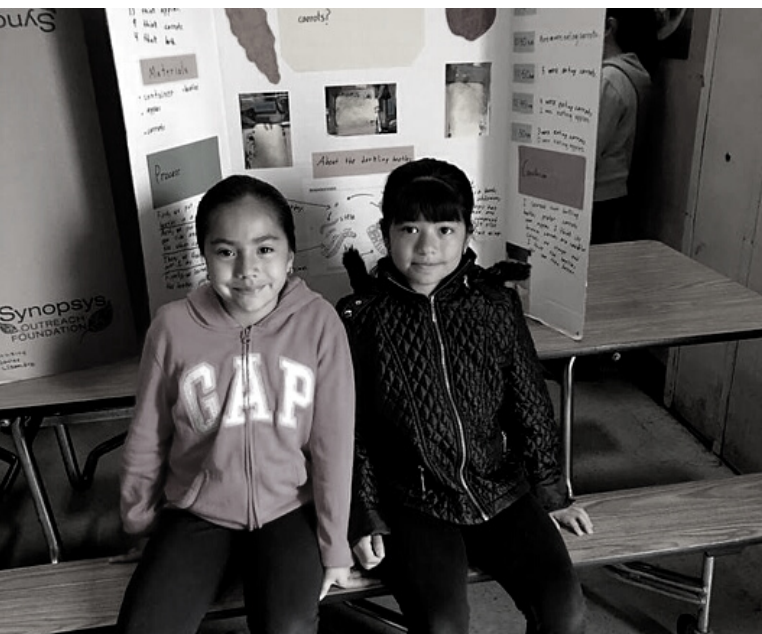
Within a community school approach, supporting a positive school culture/climate entails creating new school-wide practices that engage multiple stakeholders in meeting student needs. Bridges' approach to integrating a trauma-informed lens to school culture/climate issues was embedded in ongoing engagement with teachers, community partners, families, and students themselves. This approach allowed Bridges to implement a range of multifaceted practices to transform the school culture/climate and support student success.

## **BUILDING FAMILIES AS LEADERS**

Bridges has enjoyed an active and vibrant parent community for many years. Some of it may be related to the fact that most families live within five or six blocks of the school. "We see each other's faces at pick up and drop off every day, and that helps build a relationship," notes Covarrubias.

While parents had a positive experience with the school and many regularly participated in school social events, Comelo noticed that there was not a culture of parental involvement in student learning or school leadership and decision-making.

Comelo and Covarrubias's first family engagement efforts focused on creating a parent action team, a small group of 3-4 parent leaders who would lead meetings and support classroom representatives. The goal was to build up a robust parent leader community, that could actively participate in School Site Council (SSC) and other school decision-making. As part of this effort, the district's family engagement liaison came to the school once a month to lead a series of classes, called Parents Raising the Bar. That class provided families with a space for informal networking and social solidarity, as well as learning concrete skills for supporting their children with literacy, math, and other academics at home.



One of the innovations Comelo is most proud of has been engaging parents with planning and visioning around language instruction. She elaborates:

*What I've been really proud of is taking parents into the classroom to actually observe instruction, which hardly ever happens in schools. Once a month, we've been offering parents to go in and observe the things that we are asking teachers to implement, especially in teaching English Language Learners, and they get a chance to see it and learn about it.*

These classroom visits have empowered parents to participate in SSC decision-making, including creating goals and budgeting for ELL instruction. Covarrubias recounts:

*[Principal] Anita has made a big shift this year and is sharing data at every single SSC. So, for example, we partner with Reading Partners, and they bring in volunteers to do reading with students one-on-one onsite at our school. They'll pull students from classrooms to do tutoring. So, what [Principal] Anita has done is collected data from them and then present it at the SSC. So that way when we're allocating money and doing the budget, they understand a little bit more about the impact that program has on student learning and on their academics.*



Family engagement has also helped bring the parent and teacher communities together as partners. When the school was considering whether or not to keep the bilingual program, Comelo and Covarrubias held a listening panel, where teachers got to hear from parents directly. They explained:

*It was overwhelming. We had 50 parents in one room, including Arabic, Spanish, and Mam speakers who shared why they think home language development is so important. When the teachers had to vote if they were going to change anything [in the current bilingual program], not one teacher resisted. When transitioning out of the early exit bilingual program, we had 100% of teachers voting for a Spanish dual-language program instead of an English Only program, because they heard directly from families.*

OUSD's community schools initiative, from the inception, embodied a commitment to authentic partnerships with families—especially those who are typically under-represented in parent leadership.

Bridges' family engagement efforts ensure families feel welcomed, valued, and supported to participate in their students' learning, as well as have the confidence and opportunity to engage in school improvement and decision-making.

## LESSONS & TAKEAWAYS

- Bridges' approach to attendance is built on partnering with families, and engaging teachers as collaborators in a strength-based approach to support students.
- The school's culture/climate strategy reflects a trauma-informed approach of building adult capacity to support students' social-emotional needs so they can access learning.
- Scaffolding parents' capacity as critical consumers of and stakeholders in their children's education has helped the school to become more culturally responsive and student- and family-centered

**Photos:** Bridges Academy Facebook Page

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH SERIES

This brief is part of a series from a research collaboration between OUSD and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University focused on understanding community school implementation in Oakland schools. The Gardner Center would like to acknowledge the OUSD principals, community school managers, and district leaders who generously contributed their time and shared their professional knowledge and observations as part of this study.

The full series is available at [gardnercenter.stanford.edu](http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu).