

June 9, 2022

Re: End of Year Letter

As the 2021-22 school year comes to a close, a word comes to mind: rollercoaster. Full of ups and downs, it was sometimes scary, but overall exhilarating and full of joy.

It is hard to believe that just ten months ago we returned to school after almost two years of Distance Learning. Kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders, about half of the student population at McKinley, had never experienced a full school year on campus. Staff were faced with starting a school year in a way they never have before: reemerging together after the collective trauma of the pandemic, while introducing and teaching students about typical classroom routines, social skills, and how to be a student in school.

I still remember our first day of school in August. Students were lined up on our lion paw social distancing dots, having temperature checks and screenings at multiple gates across campus. It is expected and typical for younger students to be nervous separating from parents for the first time, so staff were ready and prepared to support any crying students. But this year was different. There were no tears of worry to be found, and students bounded onto campus with barely contained excitement. Instead, I found myself with tears of emotion, to see our campus full once again, brimming with the laughter and joy unique to the resiliency of children. It was evident that through it all, students knew that McKinley was a safe place and a home to which they were eager to return.

And so the year began. Despite this unprecedented transition, the McKinley community did what it has always done, come together with strength and unity. Staff were dedicated to getting back to our roots and emphasized social emotional learning, building community, and making connections. We leaned into humor and joy when we could; as a principal I never thought my role would involve making a video of how to do a nasal swab, but it was just that kind of year! While some schools held off on events during the Delta variant, McKinley held many safe, enjoyable events that fostered interaction and rebuilt a sense of community. We welcomed back families at the Back-to-School Picnic, enjoying music and food in 6 feet apart areas. Family Literacy Night, in the courtyard for the first time, was a vibrant event full of interactive activities. In October McKinley won the Golden Shoe Award for the school with the most participation in Bike it Walk it Week. Events like Campus Beautification and the Reflections Art Competition returned in-person. The tradition of the Halloween Costume Parade occurred on the track for all to enjoy. Harvest Festival was creatively adjusted for COVID protocols, with a wonderful Trunk-or-Treat and Haunted House in the garden.

Then, just when things were starting to feel more normal, the Omicron variant threw us back into the world of continuous updates and pivots. Events like the Talent Show had to be postponed and the Winter Sing-a-Long cancelled. In January, during the first week back from Winter Break, the number of positive COVID cases resulted in the entire campus considered exposed. Yet despite the challenges, McKinley led the way with innovation, responsiveness, and proactive organization. McKinley was the first to implement a shortened 5 day quarantine and distribute

antigen tests, develop and share a comprehensive FAQ, and provide designated optional teacher support and social-emotional learning on Zoom for those in quarantine.

Only one month later, as case numbers started to decline, the McKinley community bounced back with committed enthusiasm. Our outdoor schoolwide assemblies returned and we gathered together to hear grade level presentations on our monthly pillars of character. Jog-a-thon was an immense success with families returning to campus to cheer on student runners and the school surpassing our fundraising goal. Numerous students across grade levels proudly presented their science projects at the STEM Fair. The rescheduled Talent Show occurred in the Auditorium with students bravely performing their talents for the crowd. Newly created student clubs thrived such as the Dance Team and Rainbow Club. Students returned to mixed-class recesses and eating together in the cafeteria. Fun off-campus field trips resumed, parents signed up to volunteer, and families attended music concerts and theater informances. The campus was bustling during a packed Open House where students eagerly showed parents their classrooms and work. The smell of BBQ and pizza filled the air during the end-of-year class parties with staff and families. Exciting updates to campus facilities started to take shape, such as our new library in the bigger space of room 100, and the old library becoming a STEM Lab.

The year rounded out with a well-deserved honor; the California Department of Education awarded McKinley the 2022 CA Pivotal Practice Award for innovation during Distance Learning. Replacing the CA Distinguished School Award during the pandemic, McKinley was recognized for our exceptional practices in the areas of family and student engagement and the social emotional well-being of students. Of the 10,545 schools in California, McKinley is one of just 727 schools in the state receiving this award. The school celebrated at the last schoolwide assembly of the year by raising our award flags on the flagpole, cheering with the SAMOHI pep squad, watching a wonderful dance team performance, dancing at a dance party, and eating some mini-cupcakes.

Overall, this rollercoaster year was full of ups and downs. But the scaffolding, the heart and soul of McKinley, remained strong. Parents, students, and staff continued to come together in unity as a family. I end another year as the Principal of McKinley with immense pride, and gratefulness at the opportunity to be Principal of this incredible school.

Go Lions!

Dr. Benjamin  
Principal