

2020-21 Student Investment Account Report Gladstone School District

The global pandemic significantly limited the Gladstone District's ability to fully implement Student Investment Account [SIA] projects due to the switch to distance learning and a substantial decrease in the amount of funding provided.

However, the district was able to move forward with some essential parts of the plan to meet social-emotional, academic, and access needs during a difficult time.

Social-emotional health and wellness

The district retained staff to provide social-emotional skills coaching for elementary and middle school students, as well as a high school Dean of Students to support students with attendance issues and progress toward graduation. [Activities 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4]

We began a pilot of the *Question, Persuade, Refer* (QPR) suicide prevention training with staff across all grade levels, a process that will be completed with staff districtwide this school year. [Activity 1.6]

Targeted Supports

A bilingual Family Liaison assists Latino/Hispanic families across the district with access to technology for distance learning, academic supports, social service access, two-way communication, and representation in district surveys. This entrepreneurial approach arose thanks to a skilled new employee who realized the need and stepped up to serve this focal group during the switch to CDL. Her work fills a long-term need. [Activity 2.2]

An emergency fund for students experiencing houselessness provided for the needs of students impacted by the pandemic-induced economic downturn. The fund was used to provide essentials, from eyeglasses and medicine to clothing, school supplies, and transportation. [Activity 2.7]

A summer school program provided literacy and social-emotional support to students impacted by a year of isolation during distance learning. This month-long, full-day, in-person experience provided fun and social connection through games, art, and exploration as well as a chance to strengthen reading, math and writing skills. [Activities 2.8 and 2.9]

Engaging Opportunities

Gladstone High School eliminated student participation fees for athletics last year, opening access to all students regardless of income. Last spring during shortened sports seasons, this provided a

much-needed opportunity for students to exercise, build skills, have fun, and connect with peers and coaches following months of isolation. [Activity. 3.5]

A comprehensive review of the K-12 language arts programming, instruction, assessment, and materials was launched as planned and will continue. The group worked on vertical alignment, ensuring racial representation in literature, and ways to boost writing skills. [Activity 3.8]

Staff made improvements to the Kraxberger Library. This included physical improvements and adjustments and elimination of outdated materials, making way for more culturally relevant materials. [Activity 3.9]

Barriers, impediments, and challenges faced

The global pandemic resulted in numerous barriers, impediments, and challenges to implementing SIA projects as planned.

Due to the economic downturn, corporate activities tax revenues declined, so the district received only a portion of expected SIA funds. This meant we could not have funded all projects.

Because there were staffing shortages at the same time districts across the state needed to add several new positions, hiring for many roles was impossible. This limited our ability to hire high-demand counselors, health assistants, and P.E. teachers or to launch new programs and reduce class sizes.

Because students were in distance learning most or all of the year, in-person strategies such as Maker Space projects and focal group work with culturally-specific organizations did not happen.

Because closed school buildings and limited schooling hours made it impossible to include volunteers in the program, it was not possible for volunteers to create new clubs and activities for elementary or middle school students.

Because a majority of the district's support staff were shifted to different roles, their ability to support new programs was eliminated.

Because staff needed training on distance learning strategies, there was not sufficient time to train all staff in suicide prevention..

Community Engagement

During this pandemic year, the district experienced both successes and challenges with ongoing community engagement.

Families:

Despite not being able to meet in person, we used a number of strategies to maintain engagement and gather input from focal group families.

- A focus group of parents and custodial grandparents met online weekly from June 2020 to January 2021. This group provided insight into the experiences of students and parents during distance learning, from technology challenges to the difficulty in guiding distance learning for multiple students simultaneously while also working from home. We learned about the unique needs of students with disabilities, low-income students, and TAG students. Some helpful solutions came from this group's ideas, including a short-lived Facebook group where parents and staff could help other parents adjust to technology and distance learning while also finding COVID-safe ways for children to connect socially.
- Surveys at strategic points throughout the year helped us gather real-time feedback on current and planned programs as well as student and family needs.
- With the SIA-funded hiring of a new Family Liaison, we were able to dramatically improve communication with our Latino/Hispanic families. One new strategy is "podcasting" in Spanish our weekly news blast using an auto-dial phone system. Another is using the *Smore* platform across all four schools and the district office to create translatable newsletters, better serving our Latino, Russian, and Arabic families.
- We accomplished a four-fold increase in communication with all families at both the school and district level, providing weekly updates and new sections on our website.

The biggest challenge in communicating with families was that they were inundated with email due to the use of Google Classroom, Zoom, and SeeSaw. This information overload made it harder for them to sift through or find time for district and school communications.

Students: The biggest challenge in communicating with focal-group students was the inability to connect in person.

- This limited our ability for discussion groups, club meetings, athletics, performances, conversations, or one-on-one mentoring.
- Often students – particularly at the secondary level – were not comfortable leaving their cameras on during classes, so quality, two-way communication was diminished.

Staff:

A number of strategies helped us connect with staff during distance learning.

- A staff focus group helped guide planning for distance learning starting in June 2020, providing a sounding board where we could fine-tune ideas and identify needs before developing our plans.
- Email communications with staff increased from once a month to once or twice a week.
- Occasional surveys helped us identify the needs of students at each level, and in particular, the needs of students in focal groups.
- Staff came together organically and formed an antiracist online book group that met weekly from June through November, and then monthly through the end of the school year. This group provided a level playing field for teachers, support staff, and administrators from all five buildings to learn about and discuss racism and anti-racist strategies to help students using both non-fiction and fiction titles as the foundation.
- Regular meetings with our employee associations provided an opportunity for us to listen to and address their concerns about the needs of students and staff.

Prioritization in a year of limitations

In the first year of SIA implementation, given limited funding and the challenges of the global pandemic, we took a very pragmatic approach. What was do-able, given the heavy workload for staff? What was practical, given the budget? This led us to launch the K-12 program review for English Language Arts. It was easy for a cross-district group to meet online, and it helped educators by allowing them to focus on something besides distance learning.

We also considered what students and families needed most that we could provide during distance learning. This list included elimination of activity fees, the emergency fund for homeless students, full-day summer school to help students catch up socially and emotionally, and addition of a bilingual family liaison to help Latino/Hispanic families. We also launched the suicide prevention training with a spring pilot, knowing how many students were grappling with depression, anxiety, and isolation during the pandemic.

Our entrepreneurial spirit paid off, as unanticipated challenges often lead to solutions we had not previously considered. After hiring a new receptionist for the Gladstone Center for Children and Families, we took advantage of her bilingual ability and pivoted toward connecting with families and distributing Chromebooks at the start of distance learning. It quickly became apparent that her skill set met the needs of our Latino/Hispanic community, so we transformed her into our new family liaison. Working closely with our communications coordinator, she now does outreach to families by “podcasting” the weekly news blast via Spanish auto-dial phone calls, and serving as a resource to any Spanish speaking family seeking assistance with district programs.