

# Nurturing a Sense of Community

## *Benchmark Introduces New Community-Building Initiative with Three “House Communities”*

By Jessica Siso

Building a strong and trusting community of learners has been a trademark of Benchmark School for 48 years. In fact, our students’ shared experiences and similar learning profiles often bond them to each other and the school for many years beyond graduation. Alumni frequently return to Benchmark to see familiar faces, share stories of the life-long friendships they have built, and show gratitude for the community that finally gave them a sense of belonging. Aurora West Seamon ’10 echoes the feelings of many alumni, “...I never felt like I really left this tight-knit community. It’s still a home to me, and I still keep in touch with my Benchmark friends and mentor.” A strong, supportive community, working together in small groups, and helping each other is, in many ways, what Adam Lemisch, Head of Child and Family Support Services, believes is the foundation of what makes our students special and successful.

### ***The Creation of House Communities***

So how do you take something great like the Benchmark community and make it even better? This fall, following several years of planning, Benchmark launched an initiative designed to strengthen our sense of community—the House Community system—which mixes students from each grade level in three distinct “houses.”

“We have always valued the strong connections that our students develop throughout their time at Benchmark, but we wanted to take it one step further so that we could become even stronger as a community,” Adam said.

It is Benchmark’s belief that the House Community system will nourish our already rich sense of community, provide more intentional opportunities for older and younger students to interact, provide more structured leadership opportunities for older students to mentor younger students, and offer everyone more ways to serve others. “Sometimes, no matter how much we may try to support and encourage our children, the power of an older student taking the time to notice and engage with a younger student can lift a child’s spirit like nothing else,” Adam said. “The benefit of giving back and caring for others is a great confidence booster as well, and will help our students to become stronger self-advocates. In addition, it helps strengthen students’ empathy and compassion.”



Adam noted that they realized early on that it would be important to give each House its own identity. Therefore, once it was established that the student body would be divided among three houses, determining names and colors for the Houses came next. “We decided to have the names of the Houses correlate with the school’s mission statement (Benchmark School is committed to helping bright students who learn differently, or have yet to reach their academic potential, develop the confidence, strategies, and knowledge to become *lifelong learners, thinkers, and problem-solvers.*) In a similar way, it felt right that the House colors coordinate with the school’s primary colors of green and blue, and one of the auxiliary colors sometimes used in marketing, orange,” Adam said. Staff and faculty then created a detailed plan to guide these small, separate House Communities to facilitate greater connections across age-groups, while simultaneously allowing for more leadership opportunities for older students. In September, the House Community system was ready to be launched as each House created a flag featuring its name and color—House of Learners (green), House of Thinkers (blue), and House of Problem Solvers (orange).

### ***House Community Events***

The year’s first four formal House Community events have featured various themes and have included activities that focus on “soft skills” (e.g. attitude, communication, creative thinking, work ethic, teamwork, critical thinking).

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—Karen Berry, Lower School Head Teacher

“The House Community events are meant to focus on building relationships among students of various ages and also on building an awareness of themselves,” said Child and Family Support Services Counselor Rebecca Schindler. “They have also served as great platforms for promoting messages and continuing the conversations we have begun with smaller groups of students in class meetings.”

This first House Community event took place in September at the All-School Picnic with a lively “House Community Launch” rally in the A. Palmer West Performing Arts Center, where all students and staff wore wristbands that were coordinated by House color. Each House then followed their flag out to the playground where they enjoyed a picnic lunch with fellow House members and engaged in a variety of activity and game stations across Houses.

The second House Community event—and first-ever “House Community Morning”—took place in November when all students came together to recognize “anti-bullying” month. Students watched videos that featured anti-bullying messages and discussed the implications of bullying. Lower school students created “positive footprints” that were displayed around the school, and all of the students signed the “Power of One” anti-bullying banner, which now hangs in the Carrington Commons. Finally, students created secret “House handshakes.” The goal of these activities was to encourage students to know that every “one” has the power to make a difference, and that we have a commitment to “stand as one” to allow all students to learn in a safe environment.

At the third House Community event in December, students had the opportunity to have fun together prior to Winter Break. Older students bonded with younger ones by reading books together and with a Jenga Challenge among the Houses. The morning also focused on various acts of kindness. The students discussed the impact of the House Community Service Project that collected essential items for families in hurricane ravaged Puerto Rico and wrote

“Postcards with Positive Messages” that were mailed along with the donated items. Students were also introduced to the January “House Acts of Kindness Challenge” which challenged each House to earn 100 acts of kindness “marks” to earn a Casual Dress Day.

In February, students and staff celebrated the school’s fourth House Community event with a Winter Olympic-themed morning of fun. Dressed in casual dress day apparel, students participated in numerous carnival-type games and House head-to-head competitions designed to strengthen cross-school relationships.

### *Building Connections & Leadership*

The formal House Community events have been obvious places for building closer connections among students of all ages, but the positive outcomes have not stopped there. All over the school, there are numerous examples of the newly-shared bonds that are forming across grades. For example, whenever students come together for special events in the A. Palmer West Performing Arts Center, it just seems natural to sit together with their fellow House Community members. “Without us meaning to, it has seemed to have become the norm to sit by House Community, and we think it’s great,” Adam said.

Another example is that the youngest students in Karen Berry’s class have found dedicated “middle school buddies.” These buddies stay with the Room 2 children during House Community events and also love to spend time with their buddies in any way they can—from helping them get their Halloween costumes on to inviting them to their classrooms to engage in reading activities. “My students have loved the House Community activities,” Karen said. “It has been a wonderful way for my students to connect with older students throughout the school and has been exciting for my students to say ‘hi’ to their buddies in the middle school as we walk to art, music, and gym. Working with students in multiple grades helps my students build skills and also provides an opportunity for the older students to be



models and leaders. I appreciate how the House Community activities have united the school and given us a way to interact beyond our classroom.”

In addition to the stronger student connections, middle school students have taken on leadership roles and grown in ways that they themselves did not expect. For students who were named House Captains, it has been exciting to play the role of a leader and get to help plan the House Community events, take charge at the events, and even lead community service projects for the entire school. For example, upon learning about Head of School Dr. Robb Gaskins’ diagnosis, the House Captains developed a plan for showing him that he has the support of the entire school. They researched the signifying color for lymphoma cancer awareness (lime green) and asked all the students and staff to write encouraging messages to Dr. Gaskins on lime green paper strips which were then folded into “Ribbons of Support.” Hundreds of positive wishes now decorate the area outside Dr. Gaskins’ office.

### *The Benefits*

The Child & Family Support Services team began the school year confident that giving the students the opportunity to work collaboratively within House Communities would lead to a strengthening of student bonds and would provide an even more trusting and caring environment for Benchmark students to succeed—and they couldn’t have been more right! The benefits gained have varied depending on the age of the student. “For younger students, it’s provided a way to help them feel safe and connected. The benefit for the older students is the rewarding feeling they get when connecting with and mentoring younger students,” Rebecca said.

Younger students have enjoyed getting to know older students by spending time with them at the House Community events and just seeing a familiar face in the hallways. “I think it’s less scary for the younger kids to come into the middle

school and know some of the older students,” said sixth grade House Captain Dylan Spivack. Gabby Paoella, a seventh grade House Captain, agreed. “I think the younger kids really like coming into the middle school and saying ‘hi’ because they know our names and we know them. But I think the House Communities have even helped everyone get to know students outside of their own grade even in the middle school,” she said.

As for the older students—especially the House Captains—it has been an exciting time for growth. “This first year, we selected House Captains based on students who we know have the potential to be leaders, but don’t always see it in themselves,” said Child & Family Support Services Counselor Jenelle Tomov. “Many of the things we do during House Mornings are student-generated ideas that we help bring to life. It’s been so empowering for them to work together to put their ideas into action.” Eighth grade House Captain Ben Szathmary said being a House Captain has allowed him to “give ideas about how to make the community better and plan fun events that bring everyone together.” Dylan said that she thinks “it’s been really cool for students like myself to have a say in the events we’re doing. I think it’s good for kids to have kid leaders, and I have really enjoyed this new role. It’s definitely made me more confident.”

“Seeing middle school students take on leadership roles for the first time—and excel at it—has been so great,” Jenelle said. “These students are becoming wonderful role models for the younger students and we’ve even heard from many teachers that they are seeing these new strengths carried into the classroom.”

“We can definitely feel the benefits from cross-age interactions,” Adam said. “It’s been a shared goal of the whole school and we certainly want it to continue.”

### *Looking Forward*

The Child & Family Support Services team believes that the 2017-18 school year is only the beginning for the House Communities. “This year, it’s been about learning what works and what doesn’t,” Jenelle said. “There has been a launching point and there is so much more potential for what it could be in the future—from potentially keeping siblings together in the same houses, to expanding the role of our older students, to creating opportunities for more competition.” We hope that in future years, we are able to expand the student leadership roles into other areas within the school—such as on the buses or the playground.”

Adam believes that the sky’s the limit. “This year we built a foundation for the House Communities, but we know it’s a constantly-evolving piece,” he said. “If we are open to that fact, I think the House Community activities can continue to evolve into new and exciting initiatives that will benefit the entire school. These students can certainly make a difference!”

