Introduction

The James and Charlene Balcom Learning Center (BLC) opened in 2007 as an alternative learning environment. The center is housed within Children’s Homes, Inc., a residential education facility for Arkansas youth in the Greene County Tech School District who are dependent, neglected, or at risk. Children’s Homes and BLC are faith-based programs that seek to provide a family environment in an effort to restore the disrupted lives of children and families. The opening of BLC provided Children’s Homes the capacity to double the number of students served academically. All BLC-enrolled students benefit from Title I, Part D, Subpart 2, funding through Greene County Tech. BLC receives between $32,000 and $44,000 annually in Title I, Part D, funding. This funding includes supports for afterschool tutoring; the purchase of PACE software, school supplies, and specialized items such as a SMART Board, microscopes, and desks; and portions of staff salaries. Although the demographics of the students vary, most are between the ages of 11 and 17 and are Caucasian. In 2011–12, BLC served 30 students overall, with an average of 20 students and a maximum capacity of 24. Students come from a wide range of states, and most are from families in poverty. BLC also serves students involved in the child welfare system and, to a lesser degree, refugees from war-affected countries in Africa. Students come from challenging backgrounds—some students have been truant or runaway, have abused drugs or alcohol, have suffered significant losses, or have been traumatized by abuse; some students also have emotional or mental health challenges.

When students enter the residential facility, they go through three phases: receiving, intermediate, and transitional living. These phases help students slowly hold themselves accountable and gain skills needed to transition to a high school, fulltime employment, college, or a vocational training program. To help students develop these skills and move through each of the phases toward transitional living, BLC and the residential campus implement a behavior management system, Character Climb, which develops seven positive character traits and includes family responsibilities, respect for authority, and school.

Supporting Academics

Students at BLC work on academics each morning. BLC features two large classrooms where students sit at individual cubbies to engage in undistracted time with their schoolwork. The school also has two smaller classrooms where students can sit together in directed, small-group learning activities. The classroom includes a library. Students are separated by grade level. The five (full-time and part-time) credentialed teachers are supported by case managers and therapeutic caseworkers who assist in increasing students’ learning time by focusing on any behavioral issues that arise in the classroom.

BLC priorities include integrating technology into the curriculum. To supplement the classroom curriculum, BLC uses the PACE Learning System, Keystone Academy, and the Khan Academy online program, which is a series of short, online mathematics and science lessons.

To further support students’ academic development, BLC offers tutoring two days a week to students. BLC’s strong partnership with the local district also provides fruitful opportunities for students because it is able to offer credit recovery for students who are behind on school credits for a high school diploma.

Providing Enrichment Activities

In the afternoon, students engage in enrichment activities according to a prescribed daily schedule. Activities include the NewLife Behavior program, which is a curriculum implemented in prisons but adapted for adolescents and focuses on new beginnings outside of the juvenile justice system; equine-assisted learning; vocational training through 4-H; a grief support group; physical education class; life skills group; and process group, in which students present evidence they are progressing toward goal accomplishment and graduation from the BLC into the regular school.

Building Community and Family Relationships

The program also seeks to foster family and community engagement and to develop positive relationships. One Saturday each month, the facility invites families to
participate. During these Saturdays, 8 to 15 families participate in a six-hour intervention that includes learning new skills and practicing these skills with their children. The goal of the program is to help train families how to avoid dysfunction. Families learn 16 key parenting skills, such as how to be honest, lead using a firm but nurturing parenting style, listen, set rules and consequences, and manage conflict. BLC tracks and assesses these new family skills every 30 days.

BLC also works with a number of external partners, such as the juvenile justice system in Arkansas and probation officers. The learning center relies on community businesses and organizations for academic materials. Close relationships within the community help BLC’s efforts.

Goals and Outcomes

The program has set academic and behavioral outcome goals. Academically, goals are to increase achievement in core subject areas by a half year of growth for all students, to improve student grades, and to transition students to the general education classroom within a year. Given the disruption that many of the students at BLC have experienced, gaining a half year of academic achievement is a significant accomplishment. During the 2011–12 school year, the majority of BLC students exceeded this goal in almost all subject areas (see Table 1).

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<th>Table 1. Academic Growth of BLC Students in 2011–12</th>
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<td>Subject Area</td>
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Students’ progress is measured three times throughout the year. Students take the assessment at the beginning of their stay, end of semester, and the end of the year.

Behavioral goals are set at BLC to improve behavior on a weekly basis with monitoring and feedback. BLC implements the Character Climb program, which is a behavior management program that seeks to create change in behavior at the school and at the on-campus family home. Through the program, staff measure whether students are doing chores and respecting authority, and they measure students’ behavior in and outside of school. Every student has an individualized goal centered on social and behavior skills. Students use a goal attainment scale to measure progress toward their goal. Every week students present to staff and other students their progress toward their goal using evidence to support their claims. Their peers and the program staff then provide constructive feedback to each student presenter. The goal is to work toward having a group consensus that a student has achieved his or her goal.

To further glean insight into their own program and learning environment, BLC annually conducts student surveys. Students respond based on a scale to such questions as: Do you like school? Do you feel safe at school? Placement agencies also complete surveys about the school.

Challenges and Future Outlook

BLC faces several challenges. At a programmatic level, BLC recognizes the importance of keeping the program unified, with a consistent structure. As with many schools, this goal is impacted by the ability to recruit and retain certified or licensed teachers. In addition, maintaining a strong reputation within the community is critical to developing and maintaining support for the BLC program.

BLC also faces the challenge of motivating the students, who previously may have been less engaged in education, to learn. Teachers and program personnel strive to provide positive reinforcement and demonstrate respect to differentiate the program from what students may have experienced in the past.

Contact Information

Micah Brinkley or Paul Schandevel  
5515 Walcott Road  
Paragould, AR 72450  
870.239.4031 x 131 and 124 (respectively)  
http://childrenshomes.org/index.php/BLC.html  
micahb@childrenshomes.org  
pauls@childrenshomes.org