Principal and Teacher Panel:

Kilian Betlach, Principal, Elmhurst Community Prep

Judy Lee, Teacher, Brookfield

Bernadette Breen, Teacher, Brookfield

Pamela Mullen, Teacher, Garfield

Linda Pitts, Teacher, Garfield

Jill Guerra, Teacher, Sankofa

Q: Can you speak to the sort of "Catch-22" issue of outside partner organizations wanting to be as engaged and accountable as possible, while at the same time, the fact that effective engagement takes increased amounts of your time.  It's almost as if there's a contradiction there - providers want to prove their impact and need your input to be as effective as possible, but at the same time, the more they engage, the greater burden they in theory place on you, and on themselves.  How might they improve elements of this dilemma?

A: Kilian Betlach: Understand realities of school day and take them into consideration when trying to schedule a meeting. During the day I am busy, but I arrive at 7AM and stay after 5PM. Think outside your office 9-5 hours. You don’t necessarily have to go through the principal, either. At our school we have an identified point person from a key organization and it can be better to work with them. Go through a focal point VIP model. Citizen school model means the point person is the main coordinator; don’t necessarily fixate on the principal.

Q: Can you share a positive experience you had collaborating with a service provider? What did you consider good support in this situation?

A: Jill Guerra: I work with volunteers from Experience Corps, Reading Partners, Temple Sinai, plus personal friends (6 total volunteers come through my classroom on a regular basis.) This year I started with 3 students at grade level or above. Experience Corps has been great, my volunteer comes twice a week for 2 hours at a time. Kids are moving up the levels. My volunteer is very skilled; she is a retired teacher. She has more experience than I do but still trusts me to be the leader. It’s important for my volunteers to be flexible because kids are constantly moving levels. Good trust between my volunteers and me makes a difference.

Judy Lee: I teach Pre-K so my students are 3-4 year olds. I’ve worked with Raising a Reader’s program for brain development sharing books for a few years. It’s like your own personal library. Based on the demographics of my students and their families, literacy was not a strong point of parents’ lives. I tell them even if they can’t read they cuddle up and look at a book, which is a way to instill a positive attitude about books. Children are asking for bags and parents are too. When kids recognize site words and recognize them in our books, parents learn then too. Parents can sometimes run the program. New program we are working on: reading and writing workshop for Pre-K. I also collaborate with the children’s librarian down the street to check out 40 books a week. She has them ready for me; I just have to pick them up. I always have new books every 3 weeks.

Pamela Mullen: This is only the 2nd year of this class, so everything is new. Rotary Club has provided phenomenal support. Normally we try to buy things with our own money out of pocket, now Rotary is here supporting us with supplies, books, volunteers, and time. Last year we had excellent 1-1 volunteers, now our students from last year are in Kinder and they are moving really well. Rotary didn’t stop there, this year they’re here and coming back again next year. The students were always asking for our volunteer, it’s a great lesson on days of the week. “No, today is not Tuesday.” We also had Raising a Reader. The parent component is critical; parents want to get informed.

Linda Pitts: Ditto what Pamela said. Oakland Rotary book donations are amazing, many of our children are from low-income homes--they didn’t have a home library, they do now. They have taken these books home, and we have some that keep in the classroom. They are developing a love for books. Really good progress for ELLs, one of the most popular centers now is the reading corner. Even if they can’t read they can look at the pictures and make up a story. All of this comes from people who come into our room to volunteer. They gave us the tools to do balanced literacy. Next goal is more parent involvement.

Bernadette Breen: This year I had a wide range of abilities in my 3rd grade classroom from 1st-6th grade reading level. It is impossible to approach this group without volunteers. We have Reading Partners, all the kids want to go to it. Boys and Girls Moving Forward is also a part of my classroom. Ms. Shani works with the high level students so that I can focus on lower level students.

Q: Are there community managers at all schools? A: No

Q: Can you tell more about how the Raising a Reader program works?

A: Judy Lee—For CDC’s parents have to volunteer a few hours in the school. She has one parent manage the red bag rotation and in a way act as the “classroom librarian”. This requires the right person for the job. Sometimes teachers just take that role on because it requires some particular skill

Pamela Mullen: For the past 2 years teachers and instructional assistant have elected to manage the bags. However teachers are also usually honest where books are and communicating when lost.

 Q: OUSD has really embraced the social emotional learning and skill building—how does this emphasis or work affect your classroom, how does it actually play out.

A: Linda Pitts: It’s been playing out beautifully. In TK the crux of the program is self-regulation and social emotional development. There are still arguments, but kids are able to identify what they should do to resolve. Kids refer to solutions binder. The classroom emphasizes rules and routine.

Bernadette Breen: There is an emphasis in Common Core on how to speak and relate. MFE does a good job of focusing on social emotional development.

Killian Betlach: In middle school, there needs to be an emphasis on SEL. Emphasis on helping kids not be reactive. Also investing in how SEL applies to the Internet, regulating there as well.

Judy Lee: SEL gives confidence to move forward. As a teacher, I should not be a thermometer where I read what’s going on and react, but instead a thermostat where I control the environment. It starts with me. What am I doing to make an environment for the child to love? If the kid hates Pre-K, then I’m not doing my job. It’s the start to formal school so it needs to be a positive first step. Hands-on discovery learning is vital in the early years.

Linda Pitts: kids are learning to handle situations and to talk to one another. It starts there.

Q: What can we do to help partner better? Especially when there is turnover etc., to keep programs sustainable?

Killian Betlach: Make your program indispensable to the organization. Marketing, make yourself known.

Jill Guerra: In the balanced literacy schools, there are teacher leaders. Try starting there to talk with those teachers about programs and to establish relationships.

Bernadette Breen: OPL helped revamp library, then we had a discussion about needing a trained librarian. Have teachers included in the discussion.

Pamela Mullen: Talk to Rotary because they’ve done it well. Good communication.

Joe Budman: Have to echo that a point person in the organization and at the school is critical.

Q: What skills and training do you want to see in the volunteers in your classroom?

A: Linda Pitts: Energetic!

Judy Lee: When working with little ones a lot of volunteers want to be a friend and likeable but then I just end up with one more large size child to worry about. There’s an important balance of being welcoming and approachable, but also the authority. The teacher needs to be a strong back up so that the volunteer knows the teacher is there as a support.

Jill Guerra: Sometimes volunteers want to do their own thing and not what the teacher wants to do. This is not a good position for the teacher who is thankful, but needs the arrangement to work. Maybe it’s in screening or preparation, but you need to make sure the volunteer has clear expectations. Most of the kids need reading instruction support; as the teacher I try and make it easy. I make a “teaching reading card” for the volunteer as a guide so they only focus on a few things.