

Partnering with Parents

Benchmark's Child & Family Support Services Department Teams Up With Parents to Offer Support and Guidance

By Rachel Norris

Benchmark School's mission is to "help 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." Benchmark School is unique in having an active and extensive Child & Family Support Services team that is an integral part of the instructional program and a critical component of achieving the school's mission.

The Child & Family Support Services department, headed by Adam Lemish, Ph.D, is a collaborative team comprised of psychologists, counselors, and social workers who work closely with students, parents, and teachers, providing invaluable support and guidance to all of these groups. The team meets with both students and parents in small groups, as well as individually. They focus on helping children address the social and emotional difficulties that tend to accompany struggles in school and work with parents and teachers to help nurture every aspect of each child's development.

One of the ways Child & Family Support Services partners with parents is through a number of parent workshops that are offered throughout the school year. In addition to building connections and support among parents, these meetings also deliver strategies that parents can use at home to help students maintain a sense of consistency between school and home life.

"Getting to Know Benchmark"

The first of these parent workshops, titled "Getting to Know Benchmark," is a discussion group designed for parents in their first or second year at the school. The program has existed for more than 20 years and is made up of six weekly sessions running from October through November, each with a different focus and featuring a different member of Benchmark's supervisory staff.

The first of the six sessions includes Head of School Robb Gaskins. In this meeting, parents discuss their journey with their children and how it has brought them to Benchmark. "It can get emotional," said Child & Family Support Services Counselor Tom Hurster. "It really develops

a sense of connection among parents."

The second session of "Getting to Know Benchmark" spotlights Sally Laird, assistant head of school and head of the lower school, and focuses on the school's Language Arts program, covering topics such as reading groups, the writing program, and the 'unique language' used at Benchmark.

"The more parents understand what is going on here at Benchmark—including some of our terminology—the better they will be able to reinforce it at home," Tom explained.

The third and fourth sessions cover the role of homework at Benchmark, as well as provide parents with an overview of the curriculum in subjects such as math, science, social studies, and health, while the fifth session covers "Helping Your Child to Understand Themselves as Learners" and "Support Services/Class Meetings/After-School Activities."

The sixth and final session discusses "What Comes Next" and presents Head of Middle School Eleanor Gensemer and Transition Counselor Amy Eads. In this session, parents receive an overview of the middle school program, as well as the graduation and transition/placement process.

Collectively, the "Getting to Know Benchmark" series allows for parents to come together, share support, and learn important information about what happens within the walls of the school every day. In addition, the sessions give parents the opportunity to get to know staff members better and provide a space for open discussions to ask any questions they may have.



“It was a perfect introduction to Benchmark for us,” said parent Pat Hacik. “We got to know some of the parents in our daughter’s class, which made us feel a lot more comfortable. Plus, we also really got to know the staff of the Child & Family Support Services Department. It was great to be able to see them every week, instead of just once a year for conferences. I would definitely recommend this series to any new parent.”

“Parenting Around Different Temperaments”

The second series of parent workshops that Child & Family Support Services offers is “Parenting Around Different Temperaments.”

During these sessions, counselors educate parents on the strategies and techniques that are used at Benchmark to address challenges around the issues of temperament.

The counselors work to help parents to integrate these strategies and techniques into their parenting repertoire. “Having a discussion about how we manage difficult behaviors at school also informs how they might try parenting at home,” Tom said.

This session also allows parents to discuss strategies with professionals and fellow parents who are in similar situations. “It was comforting being there with other parents who are in the exact same boat as you,” Pat recalled.

“Parenting in the Digital Age”

Since these parent workshops are often created in response to the questions parents have posed to the Child & Family Support Services Department, a new workshop—“Parenting in the Digital Age”—was added this past year.

Led by Adam Lemisch and Tom Hurster, these workshops focus on the discussion of new parenting subjects such as “screen time” limits, the right time to purchase a smartphone, and online communication.

“We address the complexities of parenting in the 21st century since there are so many issues that parents deal with today that did not even exist 5 or 10 years ago,” Tom said.

During these sessions, the Child & Family Support Services team also opens it up to parents for discussions on how social media affects the way students socialize, inside and outside of school.

“The kind of interface and connections that happen in middle school nowadays are very different than they were in the past,” Tom said. “For a lot of parents, this wave of technology and how it affects their children is a whole new world of uncharted territory.”

With technology being at the forefront of so much today, Pat said this session was certainly beneficial to her. “There’s so much going on with our kids and, as parents, it



can be difficult because you cannot monitor everything all of the time,” she said. “It was helpful to hear thoughts and advice from Mr. Hurster, who has a lot of good insights from his time at Benchmark and his experience as a therapist.”

The Benefits are Endless!

Besides the benefit of receiving relevant and helpful information and strategies to make for a seamless transition between home and school life, Benchmark encourages parents to attend these group workshops for the added bonus of cultivating and nurturing relationships with other members within the Benchmark community.

“Like many independent schools, Benchmark is not a geographically-close community, so these parent group sessions are one of the ways we strengthen our spread-out community,” Tom explained. “These group workshops help to bring parents together to meet, form connections, and develop support as they can relate to each other and to their children’s experiences.”

This camaraderie, in addition to the sharing nature of these open discussion sessions, makes for an environment that is positive for staff and parents alike.

“I have attended numerous parent workshops [at Benchmark], and the staff and faculty really try to educate parents on topics that affect and reflect the student body at Benchmark,” said parent Kristen Becket, who also served as a guest speaker for the workshop on “Parenting in the Digital Age.”

Benchmark is dedicated to working closely with parents to help them support their children so that they have a successful experience both at Benchmark and in the future. Partnering with parents... a benefit for all. 