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Bright Futures Hosts ‘Reboot’ Event to Help Address Student Needs

NOVEMBER 09TH 2022 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Bright Futures Poplar Bluff hosted a ‘reboot’ event for community partners since the organization’s mission was impacted during the public health crisis. While visitors were limited, student needs increased, according to officials.

School site councils, giving closets and lunch buddies along with the support from the faith-based, business community and nonprofit sector were highlighted during the breakfast symposium catered by Chartwells on Friday, Oct. 21, at the Black River Coliseum.

“The two greatest needs that we are seeing are socialization for students and support for staff,” explained school social worker Carrie Booker who, along with her colleague Donna Moore, serves as Bright Futures director. Some families chose virtual education following the state stay-at-home order in 2020, leading to anxiety in social settings as schools resumed normal, she continued.

“The biggest impact we think with our kids is isolation,” Booker continued. “When they don’t want to be there, they’re difficult to engage, and that’s probably what wears on teachers to some degree.”

Poplar Bluff entered into an affiliate community agreement with Bright Futures USA in 2014 as the nonprofit’s first partnering school system in Southeast Missouri. Founded in the Joplin School District, the umbrella organization provides a framework that allows

schools to match outstanding student needs with existing resources in the community through a rapid response system.

Gabe Thompson, O'Neal counselor, spoke at the gathering about how the elementary school has utilized its building site council to partner with Mossy Oak Properties, Southern Bank and West Side Church to successfully increase parental engagement over the past several years. He noted how sometimes educators may forget to ask for help, when they are rarely—if ever—turned down.

High School librarian Marci Priest was the district's first to start a Giving Closet in 2016, followed by Junior High and the Middle School. She reported how her volunteer team serves 10-20 students daily, providing food, clothing, personal hygiene items and school supplies. When the needs are greater, she said, she leans on Bright Futures.

The Bluff Church co-pastor Dave Elledge shared a story about attending a Bright Futures conference in Kansas City with Moore and Booker in 2019, and exiting a breakout session a changed man upon learning about bedlessness which, according to information presented, affects 3-5 percent of school children. He soon launched a local chapter of Sleep In Heavenly Peace with his wife Luann, Junior High counselor, and has helped build and deliver 530 beds.

Melanie Hamann, registrar at Three Rivers College, shared about being involved in the R-I lunch buddies program for seven years, having mentored two siblings since the youngest was in kindergarten. She said it has taught her to empathize with people from different walks of life.

Attorney Rebecca Hester, who serves as guardian ad litem for the court system, advocating for the child's best interest, pointed out how students that need the most help often conceal it well. She was also involved with a Bright Futures school in her previous community of Holden.

“Our job as a community is to inspire hope in kids,” Hester stated. “Sometimes that will be the only way if the [poverty] cycle is broken.”

Bright Futures aims to meet a child's basic needs within 24 hours primarily via social media so students are better able to focus on education. To become involved, follow along on Facebook at Bright Futures Poplar Bluff, or email Booker at **carriebooker@pb.k12.mo.us** or Moore at **donna.moore@pb.k12.mo.us**.

Pictured: Attendee Stacey Clark reads literature about the Bright Futures organization during the reboot event held recently at the Black River Coliseum.

Photo and article by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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