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Unbreakable Gnomies: New Student Success Program at Monterey Bay Charter School

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**Abstract**

Monterey Bay Charter School is a Waldorf school centered on hands-on learning. As an independent charter school, MBCS receives funding from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Located in Pacific Grove, CA, MBCS serves K-8th grade students all across Monterey County. New students at MBCS are not receiving the adequate tools they need during their transition switching schools. Unbreakable Gnomies: A New Student Success Program will focus on a 5th-grade classroom with eight new students. Through this program, students will cultivate resiliency and foster lasting friendships. Mrs. Garlands 5-grade classroom was used as a starting point to see if Unbreakable Gnomies was beneficial to new students.

*Keywords: Charter School, New Students, Success Programs*

## Unbreakable Gnomies: New Student Success Program at Monterey Bay Charter School

### **Agency and Community Served**

Monterey Bay Charter School (MBCS) is a Waldorf charter school serving children in grades Kindergarten to 8th grade. MBCS is also a tuition-free public school centered on the Waldorf model of education (Monterey Bay Charter School, 2019). MBCS has two campuses, their main campus being in Pacific Grove. MBCS's main campus serves students in 2nd-8th grade. Kindergarten and first-grade students are taught at a school in Seaside. They are separated between two schools because of a high number of applications.

Monterey Bay Charter School was founded by parents and children who were inspired by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. MBCS received an autonomous charter through the Board of Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE). As stated on the MBCS website, their teaching styles are "A holistic, arts-integrated approach to learning emphasizes the child's relationship to the natural world, thereby promoting respect for the environment and humankind" (Monterey Bay Charter School, 2019). This approach to learning gives students a place to foster their creativity and the skills needed to be lifelong learners.

MBCS's mission statement is to "Inspire joyful learning and courageous living" (Monterey Bay Charter School, 2019). MBCS values are Head, Heart, Hands. These values cultivate collaboration, community, integrity, creativity, communication, and diversity. MBCS serves children and their families from all over Monterey County; some cities include Prunedale, Big Sur, and Salinas. MBCS serves families from all economic and cultural backgrounds, including family members of military personnel.

## **Project Description**

New students at Monterey Bay Charter School are underserved during their transition.

### **Problem Definition**

New students at Monterey Bay Charter School are underserved during their school switch. Many new students are forced to switch schools in the middle of the school year, which can not only cause stress on the families but teachers as well. In Mrs. Garland's 5-grade classroom, there are eight new students in that classroom. Many of whom came in the middle of the school year. Transitions in the middle of the school year can cause many students to be confused and lost. According to research by Joseph Gasper, Research Associate, Stefanie DeLuca, and Angela Estacion (2014), "Youth who switch schools are more likely to demonstrate a wide array of negative behavioral and educational outcomes, including dropping out of high school."

### **Causes/Contributing Factors**

As a result of Monterey Bay Charter Schools' ever-growing student population, the administration is forced to put new prospective students and their families on a waitlist if they inquire about the school in the middle of the school year. Currently, MBCS is taking applications for the next school year. Once applications are in, they will pick new students by a lottery system. Those who are not chosen during the lottery will be put on the waitlist and called when an opening is available in a classroom. Due to this policy, many students are left coming into the school in the middle of the school year. Transitions in the middle of the school year can cause many students to be confused and lost during the translation of switching schools. Research done

by Notre Dame stated that by the time a 20 student kindergarten class reaches fourth grade, only six students would remain from the original 20 (Notre Dame, 2009).

Getting a new student can be a challenge for teachers because they not only have to teach them about the school and class rules, but they have to continue teaching their other students. In a journal written by Russell W. Rumberger (2003), it is reported that “Teachers were adamant about how disruptive and difficult it is to teach in a classroom with constant student turnover”. This disruption can cause teachers to feel overwhelmed and overworked. Teachers are forced to take crucial time out of their teaching time to help new students. And if there s a revolving door of students this can cause new students to not get the proper support that they need.

### **Consequences**

In a journal written by Christopher B. Swanson and Barbara Schneider (1999), it is stated that “Students who move at least once are more likely to repeat a grade, have more serious disciplinary problems, drop out of high school at higher rates, and reach lower levels of educational attainment” (p.56). Disciplinary issues often occur because a student is upset about a certain situation. A family moving or a student having to switch schools can be quite stressful and cause them to act out. If not given the proper tool they need to deal with these hard times students my fight with other classmates or be defiant with the teacher. Unbreakable Gnomies will prepare new students with adequate tools they need to make their transition into Monterey Bay Charter School as comfortable as possible.

Transitioning to a new school means students are often leaving their best friends and the community they build at their previous school. Community and friendship are essential to elementary school kids. New students can find it hard to make friends and find people who have

common interests as them. Millie Ferrer and Anne Fugate (2014) report that children who struggle to make friends at an early age and can develop emotional and mental issues later in life. Friendships give children the opportunity to learn about communication skills, compassion, and how to play well with others.

**Problem Model**

<b>Project Title:</b> Unbreakable Gnomies: New student success program at Monterey Bay Charter School		
Problem Statement: New students at Monterey Bay Charter School are underserved during their transition		
<b>CAUSES TO AGENCY PROBLEM</b>	<b>PROBLEM</b>	<b>CONSEQUENCES TO AGENCY</b>
Lack of resources for new students and teachers	New students at Monterey Bay Charter School are underserved during their transition	Students find it difficult to make new friends when transferring in the middle of the school year.
Monterey Bay Charter Schools' lottery system causes multiple students to start mid-year.		Students' grades drop more frequently when they move often. Moving can also lead to serious disciplinary problems which can affect how a classroom is run.

### Scope of Work

<b>Table 2. Scope of Work for program evaluation</b>		
<b>Goal:</b> Provide incoming students with a safe place where they can foster communication and friendship		
<b>Primary Objective of the project:</b> A buddy system program for new students at Monterey Bay Charter School. This project will also provide new students with a new student packet.		
<b>Activities</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>	<b>Timeline/ Deadlines</b>
1. Research activities for students to do during meetings	1. The final list of activities for program	1. Nov 28, 2019
2. Develop a weekly schedule for the program	2. Final approved schedule for Unbreakable Gnomies	2. Nov 28, 2019
3. Observe students in Ms.Garlands 5th grade class	3. List of areas students are struggling in	3. Dec 18, 2019
4. Set date and time for meetings	4. Date and time confirmed/approved	4. Jan 2020
5. Start meetings	Students will earn tools to assist them during their transition from old to a new school	5.March 2020

#### **Project Justification**

#### **Unbreakable Gnomies**

The implementation of a new student success program at Monterey Bay Charter School.

#### **Project Purpose**

Through this program, new students at MBCS will find their transition to a new school to be a smooth one. The program's goal for this project is to foster new friendships, community,



and resiliency among its members. New students at MBCS know that they are not alone during this challenging time in their lives. This program will also provide relief for teachers as getting a new student can bring them added stressors. New students cause stress for teachers because they do not have the time to sit one on one with students and get them up to date as they have a full classroom of students that still need to be taught.

The new student success program is an educational intervention for Mrs. Garland's 5th-grade class at MBCS. The program will develop a strategy on how to help new students coming into the school. Unbreakable Gnomies will provide a place for new students to cultivate friendships and resiliency. Unbreakable Gnomies will meet every Tuesday at lunch recess for 6 weeks. At each meeting, new students will learn different skills to assist them during their transition moving schools. Each meeting will allow students to learn a key skill that will grow with them once the program ends. Students will learn about resiliency, inclusion without boundaries, positive and negative self-talk, and will learn to identify their support symptoms at school and at home.

In a journal written by Christopher B. Swanson and Barbara Schneider (1999), it is stated that "Students who move at least once are more likely to repeat a grade, have more serious disciplinary problems, drop out of high school at higher rates, and reach lower levels of educational attainment" (p.56). This project will prepare new students with adequate tools they need to make their transition into MBCS as comfortable as possible.

### **Implementation Plan**

The set up of Unbreakable Gnomies required research on best practices for new students as well as activities that would happen during each week. Activities needed to be age-appropriate

as well as give students the opportunity to work together and foster good communication. Students from Mrs. Garland's 5th-grade classroom were also observed as there were 8 new students in that classroom alone. Students were observed to see who they were working with others and integrating into their new classroom.

Participants of Unbreakable Gnomies will be new students in Mrs. Garland's 5th-grade class. New students include those coming into the classroom in the middle of the year as well as students who started at the beginning of the school year. In total that will be a total of 8 students from Mrs. Garland's classroom. There will be 2 boys and 6 girls. Unbreakable Gnomies will be a 6-week workshop held during lunch recess on Tuesdays.

These meetings will happen once a month, and the sessions will enable new students to talk about their struggles and what is currently bothering them. It would be a place where new students could talk about what they miss about their old school but also what makes them excited about being at MBCS.

### **Unbreakable Gnomies Results**

#### **Outcomes**

The results of this research and observation time led to a concrete set up and timeline for Unbreakable Gnomies. Participants would be new students and would meet once a week during lunchtime. Each week students would learn valuable lessons to help them grow at Monterey Bay Charter School. Week 1 students would learn about Inclusion without Boundaries. Participants would spend time getting to know the members and find a thing in common with one another. Other weeks would include lessons on positive and negative self-talk, identifying support

systems, stress, and the use of worry dolls and a wrap up meeting to go over things they are taking with them once they leave the club.

Unbreakable Gnomies was going to first run in Mrs. Garlands 5th grade class but due to the spread of Covid-19, only one meeting was able to happen. At that meeting, participants spent time learning about Inclusion and how they can use it in their daily lives. They learned about the importance of expecting others for who they are and spent time getting to know one another. Participants seemed eager to be in Unbreakable Gnomies and were saddened when it could not continue.

### **Conclusion**

Unbreakable Gnomies would be beneficial to Monterey Bay Charter School if continued. While the project was unable to finish in its entirety, it was projected to bring support to many new students. Students would have been able to learn the tools they needed to be successful in class as well as tools on dealing with stress and worry. This new student success program could be beneficial if run every 3 months. Starting at the beginning of the school year with participants who are new to the school. Keeping a track of new students who have not been a part of the program could be beneficial as well. This program could be run by 8th graders who have shown teachers and school faculty that they can be responsible and compassionate to students' feelings. This group could also meet after school as a club as there are many after school programs at MBCS.

### **Personal Reflection**

This capstone project has been very eye-opening for me. The start of my capstone led to many dead ends and I felt as though I am behind on the implementation process. I was waiting

for individuals from my agency to engage with me but quickly realized that is not how I was going to get things done. It was not until I took the initiative to meet with the director of my agency that I felt things were on the right track. It is hard for me to self-advocate for myself and often look to other people for help. This project has allowed me to work on my self-advocating skills and express the things I need from my agency. Through this process, I have realized that it is hard for me to make decisions because I do not want to end up making the wrong choice. I struggled to develop a capstone project because I did not want to pick something that would not be successful. Capstone has made me realize that I struggle with decision making and sticking to my decisions. This realization is crucial to my professional growth.

After winter break I struggled to find the motivation to start implementing my capstone project. Due to my lack of motivation, I started implementing Unbreakable Gnomies later than expected. I was only able to get one meeting before MBCS announced that it was closing for two weeks while things with COVID-19 got figured out. I expected to reconvene Unbreakable Gnomies when we came back but unfortunately a week later the ‘shelter in place’ order was put in effect. This was a challenge for me because I was in denial about the bigger picture. I was holding out hope that things would go back to normal and when they did not I was not prepared for what to do next. I was really discouraged when the ‘shelter in place’ was in order because that meant I would not be able to finish the weekly meetings.

One success that I had with my project was that all participants were excited about meeting every week and were happy to be a part of Unbreakable Gnomies. This was a pleasant surprise because it can be difficult to get 10 and 11 years olds excited about something. They were looking forward to our weekly meetings and liked that they were helping me with my “homework” as I

helped them. On the last day of school when they found out the school was closing, they were concerned for me and our club. It touched my heart that they were equally as passionate about Unbreakable Gnomies like I was.

I have not had an easy time adjusting to the shelter in place. It was hard for me to handle all of the changes that happened in my life. My internship and work closed, classes went online, I had to move out of the dorms, and graduation was postponed. All of this happening all at one time caused a lot of stress and anxiety for me. Moving back into my parent's home has been the hardest adjustment for me. I find it hard to be motivated while in my old bedroom and get distracted easily. I miss the days where I could go to Bookworks in Pacific Grove to do my homework. Something about seeing so many individuals who were motivated doing their own work gave me motivation. In Monterey, one of my self-care strategies was going to the beach and watching the sunset. I always felt a sense of calm while at the beach watching the waves crash into the shore. Since being home I have found it hard to find a new self-care strategy. I have been watching a lot of Netflix as a way to distract myself from the things I actually need to do. I do not think this is the best form of self-care. I have been making sure to write down to-do lists to help me keep track of the things I still need to finish. Sometimes I even write down simple things that will be easy to check off so I feel accomplished for getting some tasks done.

My plans after graduation are a little up in the air. My plan before the pandemic was to work at the summer camp I've been working at for the past 3 years. It would be my opportunity to say my goodbyes to a job I love so much but also will give me the chance to actively apply to jobs in my area. I did not want to be concerned with trying to find a job while still in school. It felt like it would be a big distraction for me. I still hope that summer camp can happen but I am

trying to be prepared for the worst. I plan on using online job sites like LinkedIn and indeed to find a job. I have found the majority of my jobs through indeed.com. I would still like to attend graduate school for my MSW and will most likely apply in the fall. The most immediate thing on my post-graduation “to-do” list is to ask for letters of recommendation from teachers and individuals I have worked with at my internship.

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