

Okatie Elementary School

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Beaufort County School District

SC-SIC 2014 Dick & Tunky Riley Award Application Okatie Elementary's SIC Case Statement

Last year, Okatie Elementary was home to 650 students, with 65% Caucasian, 13% African American, 16% Hispanic/Latino, 5% mixed races, and less than 1% each of Asian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Forty-six percent of our students qualify for Free and Reduced Meals. We are one of five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school, in the Bluffton Cluster of Beaufort County School District. The majority of our students reside in Bluffton, which has grown in population by 882.7% between 2000 and 2010. Therefore, Okatie's enrollment growth has fluctuated significantly due to multiple neighborhood reassignments. With two new elementary schools opening in 2009 and 2010, we have moved 400 students to the new campuses and 300 students were reassigned to Okatie, due to the Beaufort County School District's Voluntary Desegregation Agreement with the Federal Office for Civil Rights (OCR). In 2013, an additional 50 students were reassigned to fill empty seats in another elementary. Recently, the School Board voted to build a Pre-K-8 school in our community, scheduled to open in 2015, which will affect our enrollment once again. However, we're very proud to be known as a Red Carpet school, where our at-home and welcoming climate helps ease the transitions for our new and current families.

Higher education, tourism, military, and medical care are important sectors in our local economy. The University of South Carolina-Beaufort and the Technical College of the Lowcountry are located within 5 miles of Okatie Elementary. Medical care facilities such as Coastal Carolina Hospital and Palmetto Pediatrics are close by, as well. Many of our students' parents and guardians are employed in the medical field, service industry, real estate, military, self-employed, fire fighters, teachers, and police officers, with a wide range of economic diversity. One of Okatie's hallmarks is our school-to-community relations, which we attribute to our positive atmosphere where families feel welcome to volunteer their time and talents. We also have exceptional volunteers from retirement communities like Sun City, who tutor and mentor our struggling students in reading and math.

Okatie's SIC 2012-2013 Goals:

1. Increase Awareness & Communication to Parents of School District Issues and Decisions
2. Create a Ladies & Gentlemen's Club Mentoring Programs
3. Continue HOOT Bag Food Donation Program for Okatie Families
4. Create a Safe and More Efficient Car Rider Line

Goal 1

Due to the constant population growth in Bluffton, since 2008, we've witnessed the building of two additional elementary schools, a second middle school, and are awaiting the construction and opening of a new Pre-K-8 school and high school, proposed for 2015. Therefore, our students are continuously rezoned to different schools in order to remain in compliance with the Federal Office of Civil Rights' Voluntary Desegregation Agreement, which states there must be an equal balance of race in every school. Too many times we've heard parents claim they've been unaware that their neighborhood has been rezoned and have felt they've had no say in the matter. Our SIC believed we could make a difference by reaching out to parents and the Beaufort County School Board and making it our mission to keep abreast of what's happening in our district and communicating our findings to the community. We've made a point to attend and participate in School Board meetings and committees, as well as encouraging families to also attend or watch live on television. We've relayed the School Board's wishes that they openly encourage families to speak up at meetings in order to better serve them.

For example, the families of Rose Hill were being re-zoned to Bluffton Elementary for the 2013-2014 school year. Through emails, automated robo-calls, newsletters, SIC meetings and word-of-mouth, we kept in constant communication with these families to inform, encourage and guide them to speak at Board meetings. We facilitated an SIC meeting between Rose Hill families, members of the School District, and the Principal of Bluffton Elementary to answer any questions or concerns and to help ease the transition into their proposed new school. This meeting answered many parents' questions and gave them an opportunity to learn more about the school for which they were rezoned. Throughout the year, many families attended School Board meetings and spoke against their children leaving Okatie Elementary. Unfortunately, at the end of the school year, the School Board voted against allowing Rose Hill to remain at Okatie, citing the move would fill empty seats at Bluffton Elem. and allow an at-capacity Okatie Elem. more available space.

Also, three members of Okatie's SIC, along with our Principal, participated in the School Board's Bluffton Community Committee. The Committee's purpose was to address the future growth of Bluffton schools and to offer possible solutions for the School Board and Superintendent to take action on. For months we worked with other Bluffton SICs and community members in discussing the need for new schools, how neighborhoods would be rezoned, and the most effective way to get the community involved. By participating in this Committee, it gave us a greater understanding on the future of our schools and allowed an avenue to communicate our Okatie families' thoughts on what they hoped for the future of Bluffton. Our SIC members have worked diligently all year communicating with parents the importance of staying abreast and involved of school district issues. We've seen a greater number of parent and community participation in our monthly SIC meetings and School Board meetings than we have in previous years.

Goal 2

In the 2011-12 school year, we created a Kids Book Club for students. At the end of the year, we realized this activity was in essence an avenue for mentoring. As we had students who seemed shy and lacking in self-confidence at the beginning of the program, by the end became more open and confident. Combined with the knowledge that Okatie employed only one male teacher, we felt that this was a great opportunity to create a Mentoring Program for our boys, but also to create one for our girls. Over the summer, Okatie's Assistant Principal Marva Neal found The Peters Group, a South Carolina-based organization led by Stephen and Angela Peters, which created a mentoring curriculum for schools to facilitate their own Ladies Club and Gentlemen's Club.

Led by Mrs. Neal and SIC Secretary/5th Grade Teacher Chrissy Pope, twelve fifth grade ladies were chosen by teachers and staff who felt needed extra support and guidance. Through The Peters Group curriculum, the Ladies Club's purpose was to empower the young ladies to be proud of who they are and to have self-confidence to succeed in life. The curriculum outlined an Induction Ceremony, event outings, volunteer speakers, participating in a community service project and a restaurant outing. The Ladies Club met one day per week before school from September through May 2013. Mrs. Neal and Mrs. Pope were assisted by our SIC Chair and the remaining 5th grade teachers. The young ladies created posters outlining their positive traits; listened to a speaker about what it means to be a lady; made crafts with successful small-business women; raised funds for the March of Dimes; attended a local performance of the Nutcracker; joined the Gentlemen's Club for a movie outing; learned proper dinner etiquette; and showed off their empowered skills at a local restaurant to celebrate the end of the year.

Our SIC worked diligently to find male facilitators for our Gentlemen's Club. Along with PE Coach Jakob Lauffer, SIC community member/Bluffton Police Capt. Bryan Norberg began meeting with a select group of ten fifth grade boys each week beginning December through May 2013. Although they used their own curriculum in mentoring the young men, the premise of empowering the young men remained the same

as the Ladies Club. The Gentlemen's Club worked on self-esteem and self-confidence by reinforcing positive behaviors, modeling gentlemanly behaviors, focused on leadership and the importance of being a mentor for their peers. By the end of the school year, the positive changes in behavior and self-confidence in the ladies and gentlemen that participated were evident in the classroom, in speaking with their peers and teachers, and their confidence in walking down the halls.

Goal 3

In the spring of 2011, Okatie's SIC sought a way to help struggling Okatie families by donating food. Since we were not a Title 1 school, we were ineligible for Backpack Buddies programs even though we had forty-six percent qualify for Free and Reduced Meals. With the help of our PTO, we created HOOT Bags, a food donation program in which we would supply participating Okatie families weekly with backpacks of food to supplement them over the weekend. We had enough donations and support to help twelve families for the entire 2011-2012 school year. In the summer of 2012, Okatie SIC members met with Crossroads Church and Lowcountry Food Bank to discuss assisting our HOOT Bag program for the 2012-2013 school year. With this new partnership, we were able to increase our help to twenty families. Lowcountry Food Bank provided all food donations, such as pastas, rice, cereals, canned fruit, meats and vegetables. Crossroads Church delivered the boxes to Okatie Elementary on a monthly basis, but each HOOT Bag (now a large box) would supplement the families for a full week out of each month. Okatie's Guidance Counselor and Social Worker assisted in finding which families were in need. The participating families then came to pick up their HOOT boxes from the school each month.

Goal 4

In Okatie's car rider line, we encountered problems in both the morning drop-off and at afternoon pick-up. In the mornings, if parents felt the drop-off line was too long, they'd pull into the parking lot and escort their child at the crosswalk. This process caused an even greater delay for those in the car line because they had to stop for those crossing the street. This created the potential for an accident. The car rider staff also noticed an increase in cell phone use in the line. The afternoon pick-up line was so long that some parents were parked on the turning lane of Hwy 170. This created a safety issue for them, as well as making it difficult for school buses to pick-up students in a timely manner because there are only two lanes on Cherry Point Road heading toward the school. So we discussed with Okatie's Principal Jamie Pinckney, school staff and parents for ideas in how to create a safer and more efficient car rider line.

With regards to the cell phone use in the car rider line, Mrs. Pinckney ordered "No Cell Phone Use" signs to be displayed in view of car line. Reminders of proper car rider etiquette and suggestions have been listed in multiple Okatie monthly newsletters. Mrs. Pinckney met on a number of occasions with District staff to find out if widening the road leading up to the school is an available and affordable option. In the meantime, Okatie staff, armed with walkie-talkies, stood guard along Cherry Point Road to help buses safely get through the car rider traffic to pick up students; as well as adding more volunteers to help the loading process. Using ideas brought up in last year's meetings allowed for new pick-up procedures for the 2013-2014 school year, with additional signs and more effective utilization of the school roads.

We are very proud of Okatie's SIC accomplishments last year, and the recent National Blue Ribbon Award for academic achievements by our students and staff. Every year we strive to assist our school, staff, and families to better the learning environment for our students.


Kiley J. Wynne, SIC Chairperson

SC-SIC 2014 Dick & Tunky Riley Award Application

Okatie Elementary's SIC Level 2 Narrative

School Improvement Councils offer parents a unique opportunity to work together with teachers, staff, students and the community to ensure an exceptional learning environment for all children. Since the 2011-2012 school year, Okatie's SIC members set goals that have carried through to the current school year and will have a lasting impact on each student's future. These goals include Increasing Awareness & Communication to Parents of School District Issues and Decisions, Creating a Ladies' & Gentlemen's Club, HOOT Bag Food Donation Program, and Creating a Safe, Efficient Car Rider Line.

Due to the rapid growth in the Bluffton population, Okatie's enrollment has fluctuated significantly particularly with the opening of two additional elementary schools. Based on our history of student reassignments, increasing communication between parents, the schools, District officials and the Beaufort County School Board is imperative in providing a seamless transition and consistency for student learning. Last year, this communication helped families from the Rose Hill neighborhood stay abreast with their reassignment to Bluffton Elementary. We believe this involvement was crucial in easing the students' transition between the schools. In 2015, another elementary is scheduled to open. Therefore, this year, SIC members have kept families up-to-date and encouraged participation on the current building and reassignment processes of the additional school that will affect the population of Okatie students once again.

SIC members recognize the importance of mentoring students, and allowing them to help each other grow as learners and citizens. Last year, SIC created Okatie's Ladies' and Gentlemen's Clubs based on The Peters Group curriculum. The Assistant Principal and members of SIC mentor fifth-graders on a weekly basis utilizing different activities and guest speakers to improve student confidence, self-respect and respect for others. Thirteen young ladies were inducted into the Ladies' Club last year; whereas the Gentlemen's Club, led by Okatie's physical education teacher and a local police officer, consisted of ten young gentlemen. At the end of the year, the Clubs' participants graduated with self-assurance, empathy, and leadership skills. This year, we have 12 young ladies and 10 young men participating. Both clubs continue to meet weekly before school and focus on different character trait activities to encourage positive behavior, self-awareness, and the importance of being a role model for their peers. The Ladies Club attended The Nutcracker at a local arts center and assisted in community service projects. The gentlemen have been working diligently on appearance and positive attitude. The Clubs will, once again, attend a movie outing together and end-of-year dinner celebration.

In 2011, Okatie's SIC created the HOOT Bag Food Donation Program. Partnered with the PTO, we provided twelve struggling Okatie families with weekly food supplements for the entire school year. Members of SIC and PTO collected donations and sent home backpacks each Friday. Last year, we've expanded the Hoot Bag Program to twenty-five families, with the help of Crossroads Church and the Lowcountry Food Bank. Currently, the recently formed Backpack Buddies of Bluffton have taken over the donations for our local Bluffton area schools. They have partnered with Wal-Mart to supplement our families with a week's worth of food, including fruits and vegetables. Each month, members of Okatie's SIC, meet with community volunteers to assemble and deliver the boxes of food. By being a part of Backpack Buddies of Bluffton, Okatie's SIC members have a hands-on opportunity to help members of our community, in addition to our school's families.

Car and bus safety and efficiency are an important goal for SIC each year. Last year, the increase in car riders and cell phone usage created a safety issue during morning and afternoon drop-offs, which also affected arriving buses. SIC members proposed placing "No Cell Phone" signs as a reminder to parents to turn off phones while in line. Newsletters were continuously reminding parents to abide by school drop-off and pick-up rules. SIC members offered an alternative to the car line method. Beginning this year, we adopted the methods of Bluffton Middle School, where cars utilized both available lanes and alternated a merging point for end-of-day student pick-up. This method has improved safety for bus and car riders, as well as opening the lane for bus drivers to arrive expeditiously.

Lastly, Okatie Elementary School's SIC members are proud of the goals we have accomplished with the assistance from parents, students, staff and the community, which contributed to this year's National Blue Ribbon award and Palmetto's Finest finalist recognition. We believe our goals will continue to ensure an exemplary learning environment for meeting student needs in the future.