

By Bill Husfelt

Superintendent, Bay District Schools

I've written quite a bit lately about the amazing employees who work for Bay District Schools but I'd like to take just a few minutes to highlight one particularly hard-working group this week ... our Bay Base employees who will be working diligently with students throughout the upcoming Christmas Break.

Our Bay Base (Before and After School Enrichment) program started in 1990 under the direction of Deputy Superintendent Sandra Davis. The program has grown to include 16 sites and currently employs 57 people who support more than 1,000 students.

Before I go any further, let me make sure everyone knows that we didn't start Bay Base to go into competition with private daycare providers. Child care is a demanding field and, to be candid, comes with a lot of headaches, regulations and requirements above what's already required for schools. We began Bay Base, and continue to run this program, as a service to our community because we know there simply aren't enough high-quality child care providers available and there probably never will be because it's such a high-demand area.

While many people know that Bay Base provides before- and after-school care, most probably don't realize that this program also provides vital child care services for our community during the holidays and throughout the year. According to Director Amber Hart, "Bay Base is open and running, providing childcare for our community, most of the days that school is closed. We are open portions of Thanksgiving and Christmas Breaks, all of Spring Break, teacher workdays, and many of the holidays that school closes for."

Bay Base is also open during the summer ensuring students have safe places to stay during the day where they can have fun and continue learning. "Summer is always busy at Bay Base," Hart said. "We go on field trips and have water play day with the giant water slides a couple of times each month at each site," she added.

Bay Base is what's called an "enterprise fund" which means it has to generate enough money to pay its own bills. With limited staff, and funds, it's amazing to see the kinds of fun activities our employees develop and implement for our students.

Past activities include plenty of field trips into the community, talent shows, kickball tournaments, festivals, water play days and visits from area guest speakers. "One of our sites even has a garden where students learn all about plants and are encouraged to take home the fruits of their labor," Hart said.

It's important to note that these activities are included in the weekly tuition so that all students can participate in them. We work hard to keep our tuition fees as low as possible while also providing top-notch service.

Bay Base employees also offer vital homework help for students who need extra assistance. The regular curriculum also includes a plethora of Science, Technology, Art, Engineering and Math (STEAM) lessons and activities as well. One site is currently piloting the "Keep America

Beautiful” curriculum for possible implementation at all of our elementary school programs. This curriculum teaches students about ways they can take care of the environment.

Our Bay Base employees have played several absolutely vital roles during our recent challenges in our community.

After Hurricane Michael, for example, they were among the first people back to work. Bay Base employees staffed our emergency shelters and provided entertaining activities for children. By playing games and providing craft opportunities, Bay Base workers helped provide structure and some “normal” activities for children who were very traumatized. Additionally, Bay Base employees staffed the BDS emergency daycares which were provided to help teachers and others return to work in the weeks and months immediately following the storm.

When our schools were closed by the Governor due to the pandemic, our Bay Base staff members immediately switched gears and went to work with our food service department. They worked every day to help pack meals and then they rode the buses to deliver those much-needed meals to our students within the community. These employees were among the first BDS faces children saw after the closure because we were able to safely open a summer program.

Everyone who works for BDS is “mission critical” as far as I am concerned but I have no doubt that thousands of Bay County families consider our exceptionally-talented Bay Base team to be truly vital to the success of their students. I am honored to work with so many dedicated professionals and I truly appreciate their services.

Thank you Bay Base staff. I know that I speak for many Bay County residents when I say that your services are so important to our community and that the quality childcare you provide eases the minds of our parents and guardians.

Stay safe and God Bless!