**Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula's Future Grads Program Takes Hold in JUHSD**

By David Jacobson, Inkflow Communications

Of all the many actions Jefferson Union High School District (JUHSD) takes to serve students and their families, one of the most impactful is partnering with Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula (BGCP) to implement their Future Grads program. In the district's second year of Future Grads, participation has nearly doubled to roughly 230 sophomores and juniors combined across Jefferson and Westmoor High Schools – 13 percent more than BGCP's goal.

Future Grads supports students in getting to college and *through* college graduation, offering them counseling for applications, financial aid forms, college selection, and much more, such as developing the social emotional skills needed to ask for help when necessary, access resources, and build support networks. The Future Grads program is open and available for free to any student at BGCP partner high schools throughout the organization's geographic footprint from East Palo Alto to Daly City.

What often stands between students and college success is access to caring, long-term, family-based college counseling that is attuned to the unique cultural characteristics of low-income and first-generation college students. The program starts the summer before 10th grade with the Future Grads Summer Academy, a fun, interactive, week-long experience that introduces students to the value of a college education and builds life skills that support their success in high school, college, and beyond.

During the school year, both parents and students learn about financial resources to help pay for college. In periodic lunch and after-school meetings, students build peer and staff relationships and develop a college-going mindset. Meanwhile, their parents receive education and support through workshops that address any of their concerns.

Other topics include how to identify the colleges best suited to each student's academic and cultural interests, desire to be near or far from home, and financial wherewithal. Other offerings include group trips to visit college campuses and exposure to internship and apprenticeship opportunities. Once in college, Future Grads students continue to receive individualized coaching through graduation.

"We love Future Grads!" proclaimed District Superintendent Toni Presta. "There is nothing else like it available to students in Northern San Mateo County. The students and their families have been hungry for a program like Future Grads."

That observation is not lost on Dr. Esmeralda Ortiz, BGCP's Senior Vice President, High School & Post Secondary Success Programs. "Jefferson and Westmoor do not have an AVID program, and they don't partner with other college-readiness programs," she said. "We're the only one in the Daly City area doing this kind of work, so there's high demand for the Future Grads program."

Not just high demand, but deep, consistent engagement with the students and their families. "The reception from students and their desire for this kind of support has been consistent throughout the school year and even through our summer offerings," Ortiz said. "In terms of student engagement, whether it's an after-school workshop or a Saturday event, the students who sign up, *show* up.

“Aside from just attendance, students talk about how they see education as a means to social mobility, their desire to do more for their families, and seeing college as a vehicle to get there. In some of our sessions, we ask students, in the form of an exit ticket, what they found valuable and helpful. Most often, students are able to name specific things they learned that are going to help them reach their goal, such as how to build a list of colleges to apply to, or five things that colleges look for in an applicant.”

Beyond students’ appreciation for the knowledge Future Grads provides, they show great enthusiasm for the program itself, which uplifts their peers in the sessions, leaks into the schools’ hallways, and makes for magical moments. Some students’ excitement for the program has resulted in their recruiting friends into Future Grads, which demonstrates the degree of social-emotional learning and developing “21st-century skills,” such as leadership, compassion, and empathy.

“The students are excited to show up,” Ortiz said. “I mean, for a high school student, after a long day of school, to still decide to stay after school to talk about college requirements is very impressive. Granted, we bring food for them, and even if that's what they're looking forward to, they still interact in the sessions, take notes, and when they break out into small groups actually talk about what they're asked to talk about. For young people to do that, it takes skill on the part of our staff members and the curriculum being engaging, but also the students buying in and feeling like they're getting something out of this. Otherwise, they wouldn't keep showing up.”

In resource-constrained districts such as JUHSD, Future Grads is a critical complement to what the schools’ college and career centers provide when students actively seek support, Ortiz observed. “Future Grads provide students with enough college knowledge early on so that when it’s time for students to apply to college, for example, they are already equipped to do so. We provide the support that they'll need when it comes to senior year.”

Of course, none of this would be possible without the full embrace of JUHSD from the top down, Ortiz said. “Toni’s tone, when it came to partnering with us, was so open. She set the tone with the principals – Brock Ahrens at Westmoor and John Harrigan at Jefferson – and they’ve consistently wanted to meet with us, have two-way conversations, offer classroom space, and hold assemblies where we can present.

“The district even offers resources, such as the buses needed to get students to our Summer Academy and to our Saturday personal narrative writing sessions at Skyline College. There's just more opportunity to go deeper with students when you have consistent presence, when you have the space, and when the superintendent and principals are so bought in.”

Parents also play a major role in the way Future Grads has taken hold in JUHSD, Ortiz said. For all the adult commitment and guidance that makes Future Grads what it is – from district administrators, principals, counselors, teachers, parents, and BGCP staff and volunteers – the proof is in the pudding: student outcomes. Before BGCP’s expansion to Northern San Mateo County in 2022-2023, the organization conducted Future Grads in Redwood City and East Palo Alto, and last summer honored its original cohort of 32 Future Grads from 2015-2016, who had just completed their undergraduate four-year degrees. County-wide, Future Grads has about 800 participants.

So, what are some of those students’ impressions of the program? They’ll have the last word.

**Amanda Taboada, junior, Jefferson High School:** “My mom was a big influence. She pushed me to take advantage of this opportunity. If not for Future Grads, I wouldn’t know how to look at college. My dream is UCLA, and I may also aim for UC Davis, because it’s closer to home. I want to be here for my younger siblings. I want to major in journalism and become a news

anchor. My favorite part of Future Grads has been getting to know (classroom program leaders) Margarett Qaqish and Sandra Orozco. They're Hispanic, and they get me. I'm huge on building relationships."

**Iam Chui, junior, Jefferson High School:** "Before joining Future Grads, I had not thought about college. I never looked that far into the future. My parents didn't go to college. My sister went to San Francisco State and USF, and she guided me through what she had learned from her own mistakes. I want to stay in-state and go to a four-year UC or CSU.

"In Future Grads, I've liked the field trips and my apprenticeship at Google, where I met teams from different departments. I was there Monday through Thursday for six weeks. I'm searching for what to do, so I used that opportunity to help me just explore business and entrepreneurship. These lessons remind me I have to keep my grades up. Another thing about Future Grads is that I look up to Margarett. She guides me when I have any questions. The whole team is nice and kind, like having my own mentor. This program is a good place to start on the path to college."

**Ruth Cifuentes, junior, Westmoor High School:** "Freshman year Future Grads had a campaign, and I wanted to learn about college. I have a younger brother, and I want to be able to guide him. I enjoy the information they give us. They've opened my mind about multiple things, such as what grades are needed and the need to get more involved in the community, which looks good on a resume. My first summer, 2022, I realized I have to get my stuff together. I'll probably go to community college first and then a UC and major in business."

**Mateja Cava, junior, Westmoor High School:** "Freshman year they gave out pamphlets at a table in the hallway at lunch, and I was interested in the Summer Academy, because I was clueless about college. Now I know I want to go to Skyline and then UC Davis. I'm interested in environmental science and journalism. I've learned a lot, and the environment of Future Grads is good. The program leaders are all peers who went through the program. They're transparent about what they know and what they don't know, so I know I'm not just getting information out of nowhere. They speak from some of my same experience."