One of my favorite duties as program director is reflecting on how things are going: What is working? What needs to be reconfigured? What needs to change altogether? It is never a surprise to me that the scales are tipped in favor of “what’s working.” The Blackburn team is dedicated to providing a quality school experience for students. As you peruse the latest version of our newsletter, you will see that students are indeed engaged in high value activities because of the staff’s commitment to going above and beyond.

The year started on a high note. Blackburn has six new teachers, one new paraprofessional, and two new school resource officers who have brought fresh energy and new perspectives to the building. Ms. Colon’s yearbook students interviewed each of them for these pages so you can get to know a bit about each of them.

We greatly value the contributions each staff person adds to the mix, and there are many! On September 6, LaDeidre Jackson and Deborah Nichols were recognized for their work in getting Blackburn certified as a Common Sense Media Digital Citizenship School—no easy feat!

That recognition was followed by Long School Neighborhood Association awarding us with their “Focus on the Inner Circle” for the neighborhood association signage made by our Blacksmithing students along with Blacksmith Elmo Diaz and Art teacher Hilary George, for the community garden planted and nurtured by Horticulture teacher Jamie Moran and her students, and for all of the help with the Neighborhoods USA tour we hosted the last day of school last year. Blackburn is serious about service to others!

On November 16, Blackburn held a successful Family Job Fair and Resource Night. A big shout-out goes to the Stay in the Game Committee for the hard work and continued dedication to connect with our students, their families and our community. Ms. Jackson, Ms. Butler, Ms. Jonda Smith, Ms. Moran, Ms. Olou, Ms. Colon, Ms. Faith Smith and Mr. Humphries spent a lot of hours planning and preparing for the event. They far exceeded the committee’s goal for participants. We had 51 students, parents and community members attend the job fair. We had eight employers and eleven community organizations participate. I was proud of how the students that attended the event took the opportunity seriously and thankful for all of the staff that helped throughout the evening to make it a success. It was heartwarming to hear one of our guests stop in the common area and proclaim that he had an announcement to make. The announcement was that Blackburn is an amazing program with a caring and dedicated staff. She went on to say that even when the students challenge us, we never give up and we keep focused on what is best for kids. I am proud to say that, because we try to do right by students, they try to reciprocate whenever possible.

On November 29, UNO Secret Kindness Agents did a wonderful job working with our students. I can tell you that one of the recipients of the acts of kindness shared with me that he was overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude. As this year progresses, I, too, am filled with gratitude—for caring, committed staff, for supportive community, for students who try hard every day, and for the opportunities that come our way to educate and serve. May 2018 be filled with blessings for you!

**Calendar**

- **President’s Day** Feb. 19
- **Spring Recess** March 12 - 16
- **OPS Teacher In-Service** April 13 (No school)
- **Blackburn Staff Development** April 23 (No school)
- **Blackburn Family Night** April 27, 5:30 to 7:30 PM
- **Blackburn Prom** May 3
- **OPS Professional Development** May 4 (No school)
- **Blackburn Graduation** May 24
Project Localize/No More Empty

Local organization No More Empty Pots created an opportunity, Project Localize, for OPS students to learn where their food comes from and to focus on the many benefits of urban farming. Biology teacher LaDeidre Jackson and her students took full advantage and visited Wenninghoff Farms and Big Muddy Urban Farm, where students harvested produce, cooked a meal from the produce, created art pieces, and made seed packets, giving their seeds names like Big Red and Purple Skittles to induce people to plant them. Students got up close and personal with a few local chickens. Maybe chickens are the next big thing at Blackburn!

Stay in the Game by LaDeidre Jackson

Stay in the Game (SITG) is our building-wide initiative directed at encouraging students to engage in pro-social behaviors that are of benefit at school, work, sports, etc. This is the 1st year that the SITG Committee has focused on "Being on Task" along with being on time and being respectful. Students and teachers task-analyzed these behaviors and set academic and behavior parameters for the classroom setting. As a result, during the first term, 16 students met and/or exceeded the signature requirements for the SITG celebration. Moreover, during the second term, the SITG committee celebrated 21 students!

We also wanted to celebrate the success of students who have not been receiving referrals. During the first term, there were 25 students who received zero referrals. During the second term, 33 students received zero referrals.

Stay in the Game is not just about becoming responsible self-managers. There is also a focus on what students can be doing to move their lives ahead, thus, the SITG Committee determined to put on a Job and Resource Fair. On November 16, we did just that. Fifty-one students and families had access to eight employers and eleven community organizations along with opportunities to create a resume and engage in mock interviews. The success of this event has motivated SITG to create more positive events for our students and families.

Anabel cleans fresh produce in preparation for a meal

Stacie checks out new ways of saddling up

What's this? “Beets” me!

LaKiya is a model citizen

Ms. Stark lets Nyakueka know just how proud she is of her

Cinye and Alex celebrate with Ms. Faith Smith

The Job and Resource Fair was a hub of activity

Stay in the Game

Blackburn Chronicles 2018
**Spotlight on Students cont...**

**Leadership**

On November 15, Mrs. Bonam took some of our strongest student leaders to attend the African American Leadership Conference in Lincoln. With more than 500 attendees, the conference exemplified the values and commitment it takes to be a leader. Our thanks go out to these students for representing Blackburn so positively!

![Diamond, Ranesha, JaSaun, and Cinye show off their conference swag and winning smiles](image1)

**Nebraska Writing Club**

Students had the opportunity this fall to participate in the Nebraska Writing Club (NWC), associated with performance artists Aaryon Rogers, Michelle Troxclair and Louder than a Bomb. Per NWC, this program exists to provide a creative outlet for youth who frequently do not have a positive safe space to express themselves. It seeks to expand an arts-based program in creative writing and performance poetry to youth. Creative writing and poetry allows participating students the opportunity for positive self-expression, the ability to have their voices heard, improve their writing and vocabulary skills, better their ability to communicate their feelings with others and establish a healthy coping mechanism for life’s obstacles. The visiting artists came to Blackburn on a daily basis during lunch periods. Students who were interested in participating took their lunch with them to the creative space and chatted, wrote poetry, generated ideas, played with words and gave voice to their ideas. Students then had two opportunities to publicly perform—on November 8 at a dinner for Adams Park Senior Center and on December 8 for fellow students and visitors. We look forward to more writing opportunities with the NWC experts!

![Jayden regales the group with his poem Fatherhood](image2)

**Scared** by Niesha

Scared
Like the world’s ugliest costume
Like chemicals in the air
Scared tastes like dirt and sticks on my tongue like glue
Like an old lady screaming for help
Spirits taking over your mind

Scared

![Michelle and Davel show us that “love didn’t do this to you”](image3)
Food Box Assembly Event

Blackburn students, staff, families, and community members came together on December 18 for our fourth annual food box assembly and raffle. More than 60 food boxes were assembled, thanks to the generosity of so many. We value the relationships that our staff have cultivated in the community that contributed to the success of this project. Serving together for the good of the community is at the heart of what we do.

Common Sense Media by Deborah Nichols

Blackburn Alternative Program endeavors to educate our school community, students and parents as well as staff in responsible, respectful use of digital technology. We are committed to preparing 21st Century Learners equipped with the knowledge of appropriate behaviors that demonstrate positive digital citizenship. By incorporating Common Sense Media lessons into our classes we are able to achieve this goal. Sharing the Common Sense Media message with our community, as well as our staff and students has opened a dialogue between staff, students and parents with the shared goal of safe appropriate use of technology. We will be including Common Sense Media’s Digital Dilemmas into our newsletter. This is one more way to begin a conversation with our students encouraging positive digital citizenship. For further information on Common Sense Media please go their website at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/.
Engaging students through service learning is embedded in the fabric of Blackburn. Reality Bites is in its seventh year of implementation; Food for Thought is in its eighth year! We have a new teacher, Staci Christianson, who has taken the helm of Food for Thought this year and has been “all-in” from the very beginning with the support of Beverly Middleton, who has served on this project since its inception. We are proud that our teachers have such strong content mastery and provide higher level application of their curriculum. We would not be able to make these wonderful connections, however, without the leadership and support of the UNO Service Learning Academy and the strong partnerships with UNO professors and their students. This level of sustainability is something for which we continue to strive.

We had the great fortune this fall of being able to engage our students in an art project with Katherine Scarpello, a senior Art major at UNO. Katherine was involved in a project at Blackburn four years ago; she remembered her service learning experience so fondly that she wanted to involve Blackburn in her senior project: What my America Looks Like. Students made collages that Katherine merged into her own work and showed at UNO in October. We were gratified that Katherine came back to us and wish her much future success!

Every semester, our culinary students produce and serve a weekly meal for approximately 60 individuals at Adams Park Community Center. Our partners in this service learning project are Jeff Knapp’s UNO Social Work 1500 students. Once per semester, our senior citizen friends and other invited guests visit Blackburn for a celebratory meal and fun activities. On November 8, more than 100 meals were served by our resident culinary experts at the Fall Harvest. Guests were treated to songs by local musician Dominique Morgan and performance poetry by Blackburn’s Nebraska Writing Club.
Service Learning cont...

Reality Bites

Another long-term sustainable project in partnership with UNO Psychology Learning Lab seniors, Reality Bites enables our high school psychology students to learn the practical application of the behavioral principles of shaping and positive reinforcement in a real-world setting—training family-friendly skills to shelter dogs at the Nebraska Humane Society. This year, Dr. Rosemary Strasser gave the students the opportunity to choose the skills they taught the dogs, and also taught them how to evaluate impulsivity in dogs. Teacher Jennifer Noelle provided strong leadership and modeling for her students to ensure they experienced success with the dogs as well as an application activity of the principles of behavior with humans. Could the students affect the behavior of others just by being positively reinforcing? The answer was a resounding YES! One student proclaimed that her little brother was now less annoying!

Blacksmithing

George’s Mixed Media students at Blackburn are busily working on projects at the Omaha Blacksmith Shop, run by Master Blacksmith Elmo Diaz. This semester, they are making kaleidoscopes from stained glass. The process requires cutting glass, grinding the edges and wrapping in copper tape. The pieces are then soldered together with mirrors to create the prism effect. Science and art converge in such a lovely way!

Staff Notes

A Dose of Advice by Timara Kroeger, Blackburn School Nurse

Well, it is that time of the year again. The question is — is it possible to lose the holiday pounds? The answer is YES!!!

Even with will power the weight loss can be challenging. Staying on track may be a daunting task, but don’t throw your sensible routines into hibernation. You can indulge and still wake up the same size (or less!) come spring! Just follow a few simple rules.

Weigh yourself in the morning 1x a week. Weigh yourself in the morning 1x a week. When your stomach is empty. Exercising in the morning can help ensure you have a better behavior all day long. It has been proven that on days you exercise a person has fewer high fat cravings than on days they don’t exercise — even if it is for only 15-20 minutes.

Willpower is like a muscle: Work it and you get stronger. Practice by keeping yourself in check in a non-food situation. For example, when you are in traffic or dealing with a temperamental child, do not get upset and honk or yell during the situation. This is a good exercise of will power.

Do not bank your calories or swear off desserts. Not eating much during the day sets you up to PIG out at night. Eat 3 meals a day with approximately 2 snacks. Portion size is the key. When eating desserts, use the 3 bite rule — the first bite is amazing, the second bite is satisfying, and then let the third bite linger. Drink plenty of water. Eight glasses a day is recommended.

Lastly, don’t stress over what you eat. Take 2 deep breaths before you begin. Steer yourself to the fruits and vegetables. Reevaluate your plate and decide if you really want more. Remember—you’ve got this!!!
Get to Know

Miss Rhoden By Lillian Cardenas–Ayala

Looking at Miss Rhoden, you’d never knew she had retired from the U.S. Air Force. Miss Rhoden started as a para-professional at Blackburn last year in January. Before coming to Blackburn she had a 20 year career in the Air Force as a Master in Sergeant Communication Security Office Specialist. Miss Rhoden very much enjoys it here at Blackburn, she says its an experience.

She chose Blackburn because it was the only place that had openings in the school system. Her favorite thing here at Blackburn is helping students and just working with them and watching them grow and succeed. She said she wants to motivate them to stay in school. Miss Rhoden has a very creative mindset, so her hobbies are shopping, cooking, and entertaining.

Mrs. Tregle By Ryan A George

Mrs. Tregle, Business Management and Leadership teacher, is one of the newest additions to the Blackburn team, bringing along a new business class with her, teaching students the principles of business, entrepreneurship, and many other wonderful subjects of business. Mrs. Tregle only became a teacher less than two months ago, moving from Southern Louisiana and leaving her business career as a sales analyst for Bimbo Bakeries (Sara Lee).

Growing up in the rural South, Tregle was very disciplined. After graduating high school in 2002, she went on to complete college with a bachelor’s degree in Marketing and a master’s degree in Business Administration.

What made her choose teaching, you ask? She said she didn’t want to just sit behind a desk and do work anymore; she wanted something more fulfilling by putting those degrees to work in a different way. Ms. Tregle ‘told me she was “lured into Blackburn” by Ms. Pesek’s very high speaking of the students and environment.

As a student in Mrs. Tregle’s business and management leadership class, I can tell you she really enjoys what she does. Being elected the new leader of the Business Leadership Committee at Blackburn, Tregle will be able to use her secret passion for cooking. You can find Mrs. Tregle every morning by her door with a huge smile and a great big “hey, y’all!”

Mrs. Stephanides By Nyakueka Khor

Instead of pursuing a path to nursing, Mrs. Stephanides decided to become a science teacher. She previously worked in OPS at Burke High School before she moved to Illinois. She wanted to come back to OPS, so she interviewed at three different schools until she unexpectedly got a job at Blackburn. Mrs. Stephanides said she came to Blackburn because of the "focus on learning." She says she needed "a purpose for teaching to kids who need it." Some kids need extra help, and she’s here to help us. She wanted to become a teacher at 16 years old because she tutored at her school and liked it. "I don't think that the students are bad kids," she said. Even though we seem like an odd bunch we’re all family here.
Mrs. Colon By Nyakueka Khor

Mrs. Colón, one of the newest additions to the Blackburn crew, sat down and talked to me recently. Unlike the other teachers at Blackburn, Mrs. Colón was born and raised right here in Omaha, Nebraska. She graduated from Omaha Central High and went to college at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Even though Mrs. Colón is a great teacher, teaching wasn’t her first career choice. Singing was -- until her voice instructor told her to stop wasting her parents’ money. She then became a newspaper reporter where she learned all her writing skills. She teaches us writing today.

Mrs. Colón came to Blackburn because of the school’s spontaneous behavior, and she also likes how the classes are so small. Mrs. Colón said, “You can find diamonds everywhere.” Everyone at Blackburn High School is a gem waiting to be found.

Mrs. Olou By Lillian Cardenas-Ayala

By getting to know Mrs. Olou, I realize she's an amazing lady who has plenty of love for the staff and the students. It’s her first year here at Blackburn. There were plenty of openings for Olou, but she chose Blackburn because it felt so welcoming, like a big family. She wanted to work with students who had difficulties in their lives so she could try to help them succeed despite the issues they are facing.

Mrs. Olou got married last December a week before Christmas. It was a small church wedding in Iowa in a church in which she grew up. The one snowstorm that winter was on her wedding day. She's planning to have kids whenever God is willing to give them. On her free time, she very much enjoys spending time with her husband and also watching movies, singing, and leading worship. Mrs. Olou is a wonderful person who has a smile on her face. You can always go to her, and she will be there for you.

Mr. Smith By Perriasia Jackson

Mr. Smith, a new teacher at Blackburn, was interviewed about school and his life recently. I asked him, “How did he like it here so far?” And his response was, “It’s fun. I like it, and I like working with the kids and helping them achieve things.”

My second question for Mr. Smith was, “What made you want to teach at Blackburn?” He said he worked as a substitute teacher here and was coming almost every day. “I got along, and it just seemed to work out. People retired, and Principal Pesek was kind enough to give me a chance. It’s kind of like a second career.” My next question for Mr. Smith was, “How long do you plan on staying here?” He replied, “I have no idea. I can’t tell the future, but I am getting old.”

Now to the personal questions I got to ask Mr. Smith to get to know more about him. “How long have you been married?” He said “32 years.” “Do you have any kids?” He said, “Yes, one baby girl, 16 years old.” I asked him what he likes to do on his free time and he said, “I like to grill and cook. I was in the photography business before retirement. I love taking pictures - street pictures - and I love to take pictures when I travel.”
Mrs. Christianson By Ryan George

I was asked to interview Blackburn’s very own culinary department’s teacher. When I interviewed her on November 21, it was her 4th month of teaching foods and of working at Blackburn. She started off as an elementary teacher, but as her son got older, she realized she could relate more to kids his age.

She has loved cooking since she was 17 (I mean, who doesn’t?) Ms. Christianson has more than 1200 cookbooks! As part of our cooking discussion, I inquired about her favorite seasoning. The answer? Garlic! One food you can always serve Ms. Christianson is potatoes. Make sure they’re her favorite—light blue!

Though this is her 15th year of teaching, this is her first experience with an alternative setting. It must be a good fit, because Ms. Christianson said, “I love the students. I learn so much from them, it doesn’t even feel like I am at work!” She hopes to take students to a culinary camp.

Next to being a culinary teacher, Ms. Christianson is busy working on her degree in Family Consumer Science. With a BA in Elementary Education and an MS in Curriculum & Instruction under her belt, this should be a piece of cake! In the meantime, you can find Ms. Christianson in the kitchen with a spoonful and a smile.

To Protect and Serve By Ryan George

Officer Tapp—two words for very determined. An SRO with many different job descriptions, Officer Tapp has been an officer for the Omaha Police Department for 20 years as an Officer, SRO, and Truancy Officer, but only a school officer for 9 years. Five of those years have been spent on and off at Blackburn. Officer Tapp joined the police force in 1997, after being stationed at Offutt Air Force Base during her time in the military. She became an officer because she loves to help people, especially students. Her father was also a police officer. Coming from a small town in Montana, you wouldn’t think she could relate to Omaha life or students, but she attended an Alt. High as well and also worked at Benson High as their SRO for 9 years. Officer Tapp says “I make the job, the job doesn’t make me.” You can find Officer Tapp every morning, with a big smile and a friendly greeting.

Officer Merritt, a strong believer in “Reach One to Teach One,” is in her 18th year on the Omaha Police Department. She became an officer in 1999 after leaving the military holding a Staff Sergeant rank, and is now in her 8th year of being an SRO and 4th month at Blackburn. Becoming an SRO was the perfect fit because she wants/loves to help kids early and while they can still change. Officer Merritt tells us, “My job, I love my job. It can be difficult and I think the most difficult part has to be not being able to reach people you’re trying to help.” Officer Merritt serves Blackburn High very well. You can always count on Officer Merritt walking the halls ready to serve and protect.

Recently, student Ryan George and Du’Prece Deck-er sat down for a chat with Blackburn SRO Felicia Merritt and Truancy Officer Kelly Tapp to find out just what makes them such good officers.
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