

2024-2025 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



Kelly F. Blanton Student Education Center

Inspiring Hope One Student at a Time

Release Date

November 27, 2024

KELLY F. BLANTON STUDENT EDUCATION CENTER

Inspiring Hope One Student at a Time



Photo Courtesy of KCSOS Website

SUMMARY:

The Kelly F. Blanton Student Education Center (KBSEC), in central Bakersfield, is a community school named in honor of Kelly F. Blanton, a former Superintendent of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS). It is one of the largest community schools in Kern County.

What is a community school? According to the KCSOS website, a community school employs a “whole child” school improvement strategy. The district and school work closely with teachers, students, families, and outside professionals to promote equity and educational excellence for each and every child. This approach strengthens families and communities.

Because each community school is a reflection of local needs, assets, and priorities, no two look exactly alike. What they do share, however, is a commitment to partnering, rethinking, and at times, rebuilding relationships based on a strong foundation of trust and respect.

As a community school, KBSEC serves students with various educational needs and plays a crucial role in providing educational support services including alternative education programs, and professional development initiatives within the city.

The teachers and staff at KBSEC strive to make sure the students do not get lost in the administrative shuffle. There is a plethora of reasons a student may attend Blanton. Some may have exceeded the threshold of discipline, some fall through the cracks when a school gets overwhelmed from a lack of resources, while others may have fallen victim to substance abuse. Whatever the reason may be, the staff at KBSEC focuses on students as individuals. There is an

open-door policy to help meet student needs. KBSEC is “a place where everybody knows your name.”

The Center offers a range of services, including behavioral/mental health therapy and educational options for students who need alternative educational opportunities, such as continuation programs, vocational training and special education support. These are in the form of the following programs:

- a) Community Learning Center Tech (CLC Tech) high school classroom and independent study programs
- b) Blanton Elementary (K-6 classroom and independent study programs)
- c) Special Education Services
- d) Jobs Plus Program
- e) Mental Health Services
- f) Blanton Child Development Center program (funded through the Cal-Safe Program and operated by KCSOS)
- g) Instructional Technology Services for court and community schools

By offering alternative educational options, the Center helps meet the needs of students who are not thriving in traditional school settings and ensure that, regardless of their circumstances, have access to a quality education. The Center’s focus on alternative pathways to education is especially important in a diverse community like Bakersfield, where students may face a variety of challenges that traditional schooling does not always address.

KBSEC houses multiple administrative offices, as well as classrooms for both specialized and alternative purposes. The Center is organized and well managed. With safety in mind, staff members are equipped with walkie-talkies to facilitate ongoing communication throughout the day.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) conducted an inquiry into the effectiveness of the operations of KBSEC. Pursuant to California Penal Code §925, the Grand Jury has the authority to inspect, inquire, investigate and report on the activities of schools.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury researched topics on alternative education, community schools, the KCSOS, and Kelly F. Blanton Student Education Center via the internet and on the California Department of Education website. California Education Codes were also reviewed. Site visits were made to the Center to observe daily operations, classroom environment and to interact with staff. The Grand Jury conducted interviews with KCSOS officials, administrative staff, and teachers in accordance with Cal. Penal Code §929.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

KBSEC has a year-round school program and works in close collaboration with other school districts, the Probation Department, the courts of Kern County, families, and the community. Its mission is to meet the unique educational, social and emotional needs of the diverse student population in a safe and nurturing environment, thus encouraging student enthusiasm for life-long learning and the pursuit of post-secondary opportunities.

The staff at KBSEC work collectively to build stronger students through academics, health and social services. The following is a list of facts identified by the Grand Jury.

- A. Programs and services offered in the Center include:
 - CLC Tech (High School and Independent Study Program)
 - Blanton Elementary (K-6 classroom and Independent Study Program)
 - Bridges (Integrated Jr. High & Sr. High School for probation referred students)
 - Jobs Plus Program (Employability Readiness Program)
 - Special Education Services
 - Behavioral Health Services
 - Blanton Child Development Center (child care center)
 - AmeriCorps/Mentoring
 - Anger Management
 - Mental Health Services
 - Substance Abuse Counseling
 - Fitness Class
- B. KBSEC is funded through public funds and grants from multiple sources.
- C. KBSEC offers classroom instruction for grades 9-12. Most students only attend for one or two semesters and then return to their previous school of residence. A parent or student can request an extension for a longer period of time. However, the court or the student's primary district must approve the request.
- D. The Child Development Center offers daycare for students who have children. Currently, there are no children in attendance.
- E. The Center does not have enough licensed therapists. As a result, students in need of mental/behavioral health services are referred to an intern therapist.
- F. There are currently two safety officers maintaining a strict protocol for students and visitors. A staff member monitors the front entrance as students arrive. Upon entering the building, all students and visitors must be screened through a metal detector into an open lobby. The school is in the process of hiring two additional safety officers.

- G. Students must adhere to a strict dress code, which is displayed at the entrance.
- H. Staff members communicate and work as a team to prevent or de-escalate incidents. Disciplinary measures utilized are counseling and supportive actions. This builds trust with staff and benefits the students; suspension or expulsion methods are not used.
- I. Transportation to and from school is the responsibility of the individual student or parent, except when provided by the school district of residence as required by law (e.g., disability, homelessness, etc.). GET bus passes are provided to all students upon request.
- J. Meals (breakfast and lunch) are provided as per state regulations.
- K. Extra-curricular activity is provided through an afterschool program that involves students in physical activities to build strong bodies. This helps students socialize and build bonds of trust with each other.
- L. Encouraging parents to be involved in their children's academic program is an ongoing battle. KBSEC staff works with parents to help them understand how the various services available will benefit their child, which in turn, helps build parental support.
- M. Student academic achievement is assessed every 60 days through STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting).
- N. The Jobs Plus Program (for high school seniors) has an enrollment of 25-30 students per year and provides an avenue for developing social, occupational, and interviewing skills to assist graduating students in finding employment. In this work program, students may earn a stipend (which includes a \$200.00 clothing allowance), complete an Employability Skills Portfolio in addition to earning school credits. Upon completion of the portfolio, students are offered the opportunity to work in paid internships with program business partners. This program is grant funded annually. Some of the programs offered are:
 - Culinary Arts
 - Construction
 - Hospitality/Tourism
 - Certifications in Forklift, ServSafe and CPR

Students are assisted with college scholarship and financial aid applications. After graduation, KBSEC tracks students for four quarters to monitor their progress. Many students return to share their success stories with the KBSEC staff.

- O. The KBSEC campus has an increasing number of homeless individuals that use this area to camp.

FINDINGS:

- F1. Interns are employed to counsel students. However, there is a legal limit to the number of cases an intern can address at one time. The addition of qualified mental health counselors would allow additional students to receive counseling.
- F2. Adding additional safety officers would improve campus safety measures for both students and staff.
- F3. The addition of barriers in the main lobby would create a more secure entrance that should deter negative interactions among students.
- F4. One of the main challenges at KBSEC is keeping the school safe. Installing cameras and enclosing the campus with fencing and controlled gates would deter uninvited individuals from entering the campus. Providing security for students already in crisis should be at the forefront of creating a safe-learning environment in which they can focus on their future.
- F5. The Center does not offer enrichment activities (except for the Strong Bodies Program) or internal social clubs such as chess, photography, art, etc., thereby reducing the chance for positive social interaction, emotional growth, and a sense of belonging among the students.
- F6. Adding a universal documentation process for support services would allow counselors to monitor interactions with students and make adjustments to meet students' needs.

COMMENTS:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury would like to thank the Kern County Superintendent of Schools and the staff at Kelly F. Blanton Student Education Center for providing insight into alternative education in Kern County and services at the Center. It is evident that staff members work together to achieve desirable outcomes for their students. The teamwork at KBSEC shines through as the staff members are constantly adapting to changing situations. The students are their number one priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. KBSEC work with KCSOS to add qualified counselors to the Center by April 1, 2025. (Finding #1)
- R2. KBSEC work in conjunction with KCSOS to hire two additional safety officers for the Center by March 1, 2025. (Finding #2)
- R3. KBSEC work in conjunction with KCSOS to remodel the Center's lobby to ensure a secured entrance and install barriers for staff and student safety by March 1, 2025. (Finding #3)
- R4. KBSEC work in conjunction with KCSOS to secure the campus with fencing, controlled gates, and cameras for safety purposes by May 1, 2025. (Finding #4)
- R5. KBSEC incorporate enrichment programs into its curriculum that include physical and social activities to improve student social interaction and emotional growth by May 1, 2025. (Finding #5)
- R6. By May 1, 2025, KBSEC should consult with their departments to create a universal documentation process that would benefit both staff and students. (Finding #6)

NOTES:

- The Kelly F. Blanton Education Center and Kern County Superintendent of Schools should post a copy of this report, which will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**
 - Kelly F. Blanton Student Education Center
 - Findings #1 through #6
 - Recommendations #1 through #6

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:**
 - Kern County Superintendent of Schools
 - Findings #1 through #4
 - Recommendations #1 through #4

RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c) AND 933.05 TO:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF KERN
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREPERSON
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
--



January 17, 2025

Presiding Judge John W. Lua
Superior Court of California.
County of Kern
1415 Truxtun Avenue, Suite 212
Bakersfield, California 93301

Todd Lucas, Foreperson
2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury
1415 Truxtun Avenue, Suite 600
Bakersfield, California 93301

Re: 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury Report

Dear Judge Lua and Mr. Lucas:

On November 27, 2024, the 2024-2025 Kern County Grand Jury publicly issued a report regarding the Kelly F. Blanton Student Education Center (Blanton Education Center). This document is the official response by the office of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS) to each of the findings and recommendations made in the Grand Jury report.

As a preliminary matter, it is important to note that the Blanton Education Center is a year-round public school program operated by KCSOS. The responses requested in the report and the deadlines set for those responses indicate that the Blanton Education Center is a separate entity from KCSOS. For clarity, the Blanton Education Center is a community school program operated by KCSOS.¹ Therefore, responsive information to all findings and recommendations are provided collectively here.

Before specifically responding to findings from the report, there is one item from the text of the report itself that merits clarification. Item D on Page 3 provides as follows:

The Child Development Center offers daycare for students who have children. Currently, there are no children in attendance.

¹ Extensive information regarding the Blanton Education Center can be found here:
<https://kern.org/alternative-education/community-schools/blanton-education-center/>.

First, this statement is vague as to the time no children were in attendance. It could have been there were no children at the Child Development Center whose parents were students at the Blanton Education Center at the time of the visit by the Grand Jury. However, the Child Development Center has been and is being fully utilized by community parents.

FINDINGS

The findings made in the report are contained on Page 5 of the document. Each of the findings from the report are included below immediately followed by the response from KCSOS:

F.1. Interns are employed to counsel students. However, there is a legal limit to the number of cases an intern can address at one time. The addition of qualified mental health counselors would allow additional students to receive counseling.

Response to F.1.

The Blanton Education Center prefers the use of clinical school social workers holding or working toward a Pupil Personnel Services credential issued by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to support students in the programs at Blanton. If a student needs additional supports or has a need for mental health services, they are referred to the appropriate resources to receive that care. The school social workers are the link to connect the student to the right resources at the right time. The actual services the student needs based on the assessments/evaluations performed by the school social worker take place outside of school hours.

Any interns working to obtain their hours to become school social workers are supervised and mentored by a licensed clinical social worker. They are not "employed to counsel students." As with a fully-licensed school social worker, the role of an intern is to help identify the needs of the students, which could include a referral for mental health services.

F.2. Adding additional safety officers would improve campus safety measures for both students and staff.

Response to F.2.

The report notes that KCSOS is in the process of hiring additional safety officers. The safety of our students, staff, and the public is of paramount concern to KCSOS, and we continue to develop and implement plans to address safety at the Blanton Education Center. This includes hiring additional safety officers.

F.3. The addition of barriers in the main lobby would create a more secure entrance that should deter negative interactions among students.

Response to F.3.

The safety risk posed by the current design of the main lobby is an issue that KCSOS was proactively addressing before the Grand Jury report was issued. KCSOS hosts the Safer Schools Coalition of Kern, which is a collaborative think tank established by KCSOS to promote the safety and wellbeing of Kern County school children. A function of the Safer Schools Coalition is to outline best practices and empower districts to make positive safety changes. The Safer Schools Coalition has partnered with local law enforcement, fire departments, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Central California Intelligence Center (CCIC) to proactively identify common areas of enhanced security through quarterly Vulnerability Assessments across the county. Before receiving the Grand Jury report findings, KCSOS had identified and approved the following updates at Blanton Education Center which happen to coincide with findings and recommendations contained in the Grand Jury report.

1. Install a wall and door system (vestibule) in the main lobby that directs visitors to a desk/window area to check in.
2. Continue fencing around the entire property line with RFID controlled gates.
3. Install a modern security camera system.
4. Implement a visitor management system.

F.4. One of the main challenges at [the Blanton Education Center is keeping the school safe. Installing cameras and enclosing the campus with fencing and controlled gates would deter uninvited individuals from entering the campus. Providing security for students already in crisis should be at the forefront of creating a safe-learning environment in which they can focus on their future.

Response to F.4.

See response to F.3. above. A modern security camera system has already been installed and is fully operational.

F.5. The Center does not offer enrichment activities (except for the Strong Bodies Program) or internal social clubs such as chess, photography, art, etc., thereby reducing chance for positive social interaction, emotional growth, and a sense of belonging among the students.

Response to F.5.

Many efforts have been made over the years to start such programs and have students stay after school to participate in additional programs. The Blanton Education Center is now taking a new approach by having these programs throughout the school day within the curriculum of Project Based Learning. The CLC Tech campus has two days with school periods of construction and culinary arts. CTE teachers offer workshops in construction, culinary arts and many other areas for both sites during these periods. Students can participate in these programs during those times as enrichment, learn new things, and hopefully experience some positive social interaction and emotional growth too.

F.6. Adding a universal documentation process for support services would allow counselors to monitor interactions with students and make adjustments to meet students' needs.

Response to F.6.

Universal student documentation is provided through the Student Information System – Aeries. Teachers, social workers, and administrators input case notes and student information into a secure log within Aeries for continued tracking. Aeries is not a new tool, and it would have been fully operational at the time of the site visits by members of the Grand Jury.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R.1. KBSEC work with KCSOS to add qualified counselors to the Center by April 1, 2025. (Finding #1)

Response to R.1.

The Blanton Education Center utilizes clinical social workers rather than counselors to support its student population. The Blanton Education Center is currently participating in a program with clinical social workers who, while they have completed all their education requirements, need to complete hours to clear their educational experience requirements. Those individuals are mentored and supervised by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. There are currently four social workers on both CLC and CLC Tech Campuses. The CLC principal and one of those social workers are Licensed Clinical Social Workers. The recommended ratio for school social worker to student

is 1:250.² At the current time, the total number of students served at the Blanton Education Center is 261.

R.2. KBSEC work in conjunction with KCSOS to hire two additional safety officers for the Center by March 1, 2025. (Finding #2)

Response to R.2.

The Grand Jury report is unclear as to the number of safety officers the Grand Jury believes are currently employed to serve at the Blanton Education Center (Page 3, Item F). In any event, there are currently two campus supervisor positions on each campus (the Blanton Education Center is made up of two campuses). When a position is vacant, it is filled with a qualified substitute.

KCSOS is in the final stages of approval to hire a "School Resource Officer" (also known as an SRO) from the Bakersfield Police Department. This would greatly enhance the security efforts at the Blanton Education Center. The SRO would also work in collaboration with the Kern County Probation officers at the Bridges Career Development site.

R.3. KBSEC work in conjunction with KCSOS to remodel the Center's lobby to ensure a secured entrance and install barriers for staff and student safety by March 1, 2025. (Finding #3)

Response to R.3.

As noted in the response to Finding #3 above, this is an area KCSOS already identified as needing improvement. The necessary facilities work has been approved and the project is currently in the design stage. It is anticipated the project will be completed by the end of summer 2025.

R.4. KBSEC work in conjunction with KCSOS to secure the campus with fencing, controlled gates, and cameras for safety purposes by May 1, 2025. (Finding #4)

Response to R.4.

A modern camera system has already been installed and is fully operational. It allows for the cameras to be accessed from the appropriate staff members' phones when needed. The vast majority of the Blanton Education Center property has now been fenced. Fully fencing the property allows

² <https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/NASW-Practice-Standards-Guidelines/NASW-Standards-for-School-Social-Work-Services>

KCSOS to place signage regarding consequences for trespassing that can be enforced if/when necessary. Controlled gate access had already been identified as a need related to the complete fencing of the property. The fencing/gating project will likely be completed by the end of 2025.

R.5. KBSEC incorporate enrichment programs into its curriculum that include physical and social activities to improve student social interaction and emotional growth by May 1, 2025. (Finding #5)

Response to R.5.

Please see the response to Finding #5 above.

R.6. By May 1, 2025, KBSEC should consult with their departments to create a universal documentation process that would benefit both staff and students. (Finding #6)

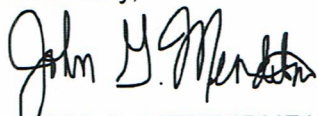
Response to R.6.:

Please see the response to Finding #6 above.

We noted with pride the "comments" section at the conclusion of the Grand Jury report. We wholeheartedly believe that our staff members are advocates for children and the students are their number one priority.

If any additional information is needed after the information in this response is reviewed, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be happy to host the Kern County Grand Jury at another visit to the Blanton Education Center once the facilities work described above is completed.

Sincerely,



JOHN G. MENDIBURU, Ed.D.
County Superintendent