Reflections from Breakthrough Saint Paul on Their Success with the Jack Kent Cooke Young Scholars Program

In 2009, Breakthrough Saint Paul had two students accepted into the Jack Kent Cooke (JKC) Young Scholars program. This is an amazing accomplishment considering that this prestigious program chose only 50 Young Scholars from across the country this past year. We recently talked with Ashley Cooper, Student & Family Liaison at Breakthrough Saint Paul, to find out how Breakthrough Saint Paul is so successful with their JKC Young Scholars applications. The following are her reflections and recommendations. If you’d like to talk with Ashley further about Saint Paul’s JKC application process, please contact her at acooper@moundsparkacademy.org.

Start early and be focused!
At Breakthrough Saint Paul, program staff are very focused and intentional about which students they recruit to apply to the JKC Young Scholars Program and they start the recruiting process early in the year. Program staff are on the lookout at the beginning of the year for students who would be a good fit for the JKC Young Scholars Program. They look for students who are doing well academically, who take honors classes, who have good attendance, and who have supportive families. Program staff talk with their students about the JKC Young Scholars program early on in the year to get them thinking about the program. Saint Paul’s support of JKC applicants is very intensive, so they focus on 5-6 students who are the best fit for the JKC Young Scholars program and for whom they can provide the level of support that’s needed.

Work closely with parents.
Breakthrough Saint Paul recognizes that having students’ families on board and excited about the JKC Young Scholars program is a critical part of the process, so at the very beginning of the application process (which for Saint Paul formally begins in February), program staff meet with students’ families to discuss the JKC Scholarship, the commitment required and the application process. Program staff found that once parents know about the benefits of the JKC scholarship, they are very responsive, but trying to inform them of the opportunity initially can be challenging. Breakthrough Saint Paul uses a variety of strategies for connecting with families, including having a Hmong family liaison who can communicate with their Hmong families who don’t speak English and who can answer families’ questions in detail. If they are working with families whose first language is Spanish, they will ask students or teachers who speak Spanish to help translate or help with family meetings. Saint Paul also asks the families of students who have won the award previously to talk about the JKC Young Scholars program and answer questions.
Set aside time during your program for students to work on their applications. Breakthrough Saint Paul found that it can be difficult for students to balance the amount of work necessary to put together the JKC Young Scholars application with all the other things students are doing (e.g., schoolwork, extracurricular activities, family responsibilities) and that students don’t always spend as much time on the application on their own as they would like them to. Knowing that sometimes “life gets in the way,” Saint Paul reserves time during their Saturday sessions for students to work on their JKC applications. Saint Paul’s JKC applicants receive three hours of one on one help with their application essays from either program staff or volunteers on two Saturdays a month throughout the application process.

Provide intensive support to students around brainstorming and writing essays. Have students revise, revise and revise again! Breakthrough Saint Paul believes that the essays and short answer sections of the application are what set students apart and therefore, program staff devote a lot of time and energy to helping students brainstorm, draft and revise their essays. According to Ashley, “kids have a hard time brainstorming on their own and figuring out what specifically would make them stand out in the application.” Program staff and volunteers work with students during their Saturday one on one time to help students brainstorm ideas for the essays, which can in turn helps students clarify what they’d like to do with the scholarship. Saint Paul students submit drafts of their essays and are required to do multiple revisions of their essays. As program staff and volunteers work with students to improve their essays, they focus on several things: 1) helping students put their personalities into their writing, 2) making sure students are concise in their writing and in their ideas and 3) specificity. According to Ashley, “students tend to answer questions without a lot of specifics,” so program staff are very intentional in helping students think through their answers and be as specific as possible.

Be thorough in organizing logistics and be prepared to spend a lot of time on the process. In Saint Paul, program staff are very hands-on and organized throughout the JKC application process. Program staff have detailed timelines and to-do lists and each JKC applicant receives a packet of information in early February which includes a timeline of the application process, copies of the JKC Young Scholars application and a newspaper article about previous winners of the JKC scholarship. Program staff keep tabs on the final checklist for their students’ applications and program staff are in charge of gathering all the final pieces, even when it means tracking down missing pieces from families or teachers. Though the process can be time-consuming, Ashley attributes Saint Paul’s success to the fact that they are willing to put in the necessary time. According to Ashley, “you have to put in the time. If you’re serious, you’ll put in a lot of time. Any site can have students who win [the JKC Young Scholars Award] if they choose their kids wisely and put in the time.”