

January 14, 2025

Dear Members of the Board of the Park City Education Foundation (PCEF),

It is our understanding that PCEF has undertaken a strategic planning exercise over the last several months that includes reconsidering PCEF's commitment to the Bright Futures (BF) program and replacing it with another completely different structure that would operate under the same name.

Leaks regarding the types of changes being considered have already led to the resignation of two former and current staff members and high emotions among some BF Committee members.

Candidly, we are dismayed that strategic discussions regarding the future of Bright Futures did not include any of the four members of the BF Committee who possess historical experience with the program and a deep domain knowledge of this and other similar initiatives that have both succeeded and failed. The PCEF Board will be making decisions that will determine the future success or failure of the BF program without the benefit of domain experience on this program and more broadly in this field.

Attempts by knowledgeable BF Committee members to understand the wholesale redesign being considered and bring domain knowledge to the discussion have been met with obfuscation and delays. It is for this reason that the Founding sponsors of Bright Futures: Rick Bleil, Lynn Bleil, Eric Garen, Moe Hickey, Franklin Morton, Ernest Oriente, Stacey Sayers, and John Wendolowski ("the Founders") felt compelled to write this letter to the PCEF Board before any decisions are made regarding the future structure of the BF program. The Founders have been with the program from the beginning and are responsible for, through personal donations and active fundraising, the vast majority of the \$3+ million raised for the program to date. *We have invested our time and money because we care deeply about these students. We worry that their futures are now in jeopardy.*

Information Gleaned from Various Discussions Suggest That PCEF Is Pursuing a Path That Will Irreparably Harm the Program and the Students It Serves.

We have come to understand that the PCEF Board will be considering a new program to replace the BF program franchised from Bright Prospect that would:

- a) Separate the BF support provided in high school from the support provided to students who have matriculated to college.
- b) Create a first-generation high school counselor position under a BF banner who would have responsibility not only for helping college-ready students prepare for and successfully enter college, but also for addressing the broader challenges facing at-risk, first generation students in high school such as absenteeism, language gaps, and academic remediation.
- c) Expand the range of services beyond college access and completion to include other career paths, including trade schools and other avenues.

Regarding point a), the Founders as well as former BF staff have repeatedly told PCEF staff that the continuity of support from high school through college is critical. Unless students have built a trust-based relationship during high school with BF staff, they will not accept their support during college years. This will leave the new-BF incapable of influencing college students' decisions and create a significant psychological barrier to college students reaching out for help to BF staff when they are in need/distress. The college drop-out rate will rise.

Regarding points b) and c), while these programmatic extensions are admirable undertakings, they are not the mission of Bright Futures and weaken its ability to help college-bound students succeed. Further, it is not the program to which donors have contributed over \$3 million since the program's inception. Using these monies for any purpose other than funding the BF program under its current specific mission would be viewed as PCEF acting in bad faith by the Founders and other donors who have restricted their gifts to BF.

We know that the BF program, as it is currently designed, works exceptionally well. College persistence and completion rates for BF students are close to 90% as compared to the national average of 21% for first generation college students (*Indicators of Higher Education in the United States*. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. 2022.) This is still more impressive when compared to most other programs with similar students and goals that typically achieve only a 40% to 50% completion rate.

PCEF staff are now proposing a wholesale redesign of the BF program without any knowledge of how their proposed changes will impact student success rates. BF Committee members and the PCEF Board are being asked to “trust the process”, but prior proposals and decisions by PCEF management demonstrate that they are uninformed and not solely focused on the needs of students.

There Have Already Been Potentially Costly and Harmful Decisions That Stemmed From PCEF Staff's Lack of Domain Knowledge.

To date, PCEF staff have not demonstrated a clear understanding of the needs of the program nor the complexities of the initiatives that comprise the program and are integral to its success.

When PCEF lost its previous Program Director in 2023, the Founders stated repeatedly that the BF Program was sufficiently complex and growing fast enough to warrant hiring a strong, full-time Program Director. Despite this input, the PCEF management made the decision to hire a Director who would be given both BF and other PCEF duties. The Director who took on this split role discovered that BF was, indeed, a full-time job and devoted 100% of her time to BF. Now that PCEF lost this new Director, there appears to be no effort to fill the demanding role of leading the BF program nor to fill the recently vacated position supporting BF high school students.

Another example of the PCEF Board and staff acting without domain knowledge occurred when PCEF management put forward a plan to distribute financial support on a per capita basis to all students rather than utilizing the needs-based allocation that was historically applied. Their rationale for this decision was that the existing process placed too great a demand on staff time. This plan would have been implemented but for a BF Committee member, not PCEF staff, bringing actual data to the table. Analysis of historical allocations of financial support proved that such a move would waste tens of thousands of dollars by funding students with no need and would put students with greater financial needs at risk because they would face insurmountable fiscal shortfalls. The plan was quietly abandoned.

PCEF staff's lack of program and domain knowledge, and their unwillingness to incorporate the expertise of those with far greater knowledge, is highlighted in the recent resignation email of the only remaining long-term BF team member (attached).

Both PCEF and the Founders Question the Fit of Bright Futures within PCEF's Historical Mission.

PCEF senior staff and some Board members have indicated to us that PCEF has questioned whether the program is a good fit with the original mission of PCEF: to raise funds for the Park City School District (PCSD) and distribute these funds to worthy efforts that support K-12 students within the District. BF is the ONLY true “program” within PCEF that requires dedicated staff and for which PCEF is wholly responsible for its success. Further, it is the only program that actively supports students after they have matriculated from the PCSD.

The Founders have noted attempts to make BF fit into the traditional PCEF operating model. The decision to not hire a dedicated Program Director was one such effort to bring BF in line with PCEF's historical operating approach. The decision to disband the Bright Futures Board and replace it with a Committee largely comprised of PCEF appointees with little or no prior knowledge of the program is another example.

Spin Out the Program Into a 501(c)(3) Structure Rather Than Undergo a Fundamental Redesign To Force It To Fit the PCEF Model.

Rather than continue to decide (i) whether the BF Program, under its current highly successful design, fits with the PCEF model or (ii) whether to replace it with an unproven, highly-suspect program that does fit the PCEF model, the Founders propose that the PCEF Board consider spinning out the program to a separate, partner 501(c)(3) that adheres to the current, highly successful BF mission and program design.

Do not replace a program that has so effectively served the students of the PCSD with a new, unproven structure, just to force it into PCEF's fund-raising/grant-making model.

The Founders are ready and willing to govern and operate a Bright Futures that is independent of PCEF and PCSD. We would form, design, and operate this independent BF to minimize any disruption to PCEF staff and its financials. Here is a high-level example of how this could work:

- To gain access to students and their academic and financial information during their high school years, the independent BF would:
 - Require the parents of each student to sign a FERPA waiver as part of their agreement to join the program.
 - Sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the District to allow BF staff to gain access to students (much like volunteer tutors), and to their academic and financial information subject to the above waiver.
 - Require that BF staff would undergo the same rigorous background checks PCEF staff undergo today.

This is exactly the structure used successfully by Bright Prospect in Pomona with its school district, and by its other replication site, the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula in Palo Alto with the school districts it serves. It is the same structure used by scores of similar programs with their districts across the nation.

- An independent BF would hire a Program Director and absorb the current BF staff (and their associated costs) who support the program's college and high school students.
- BF would take on its own legal, accounting, HR and other administrative support.
- The current \$1.9 million in BF-restricted monies being managed by PCEF could remain with PCEF, allowing PCEF to treat the independent BF like any other program that it funds within the District. After an initial grant from PCEF from those balances to cover start-up costs, each year BF would establish an annual request for funds to cover operating expenses and financial aid for students; thus, drawing down the \$1.9 million over many years.
- The independent BF would partner with PCEF for fundraising. BF would fundraise on its own and PCEF could also raise funds for BF programming, with a standard percentage (15-20%) of those future funds flowing to PCEF as remuneration for its fundraising efforts.

In summary, we implore the Board to not make any decisions regarding the plans for Bright Futures until those plans can be reviewed by those with greater experience and knowledge of college access and success programs. If after this review, it is determined that the changes will undermine the core tenets of a successful program and could harm the very students they are meant to help, we will recommend that PCEF either continue the successful Bright Futures program as it now exists or spin it out into a new 501(c)(3) that will partner with PCEF and PCSD to continue and expand the success of program and the students it serves.