

## **CYBHI Audiocast, Urban Promise Academy Transcript**

### **Lan Nguyen:**

Attending to the mental health and wellbeing of children and youth is fundamental to helping young people thrive in school life, career and community. Because of their access to and impact on children, youth, and families, schools are uniquely positioned to support this work. The school building can offer space for peer-to-peer supports, individual therapy, community resources, and access to experiences that promote mental health and wellbeing, such as mindfulness activities. Moreover, schools can offer a supportive and caring environment for students, families, and educators. In this audiocast, you'll hear about Urban Promise Academy or U-P-A or UPA for short, a middle school and full-service community school in the Oakland Unified School District that centers the health and wellbeing of Oakland's young people and families in how they do school. Years in the making, UPA has grown a comprehensive school-based mental health system, grounded in a culture of care and guided by community.

Hi, my name is Lan Nguyen. In addition to my voice, you'll hear from four Urban Promise Academy leaders, Tierre Mesa, principal, Glendy Cordero, Community School Manager, Mary Ellen Bayardo, school counselor, Agustin Barajas, Restorative Justice facilitator and UPA alumni, and Dr. Tracy Smith, clinical faculty and director of the school-based collaborative at the Wright Institute. Urban Promise Academy was founded in 2001 with a clear purpose to serve the whole child and make a positive impact for children and families. Let's hear more from Principal Tierre Mesa about the children and families that UPA serves.

### **Tierre Mesa:**

UPA, Urban Promise Academy, is in East Oakland. We're in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, California, and our community is primarily Latino. We serve about 15% of our families are newcomers. They've been in the country for less than three years. A growing population of our immigrant families are coming from Guatemala and are Mam speaking. 97% of our students and families qualify for free and reduced lunch, which means all of our students are impacted by poverty and the challenges that that brings just for our families being able to get their students basic needs met... stable housing and food. And with that, we've really invested in a robust family resource center that is supporting families with connecting to community-based organizations to get those needs met. And also, how are we serving those needs within house. One of the strengths of our community in the Fruitvale is we have a long history of organizing and community-based organizations that are developed to serve the needs of the community. So, we've been really creative in thinking about, "how do we partner with the organizations that are already here to make sure that our families know how to access the resources? How can we be that bridge?"

### **Lan Nguyen:**

These partnerships are core to community outreach efforts at Urban Promise Academy, seeing a critical need for consistent and readily available mental health supports for its students UPA formed a partnership with the Wright Institute in 2014 to provide onsite therapy services. The Wright Institute is a

local clinic that provides psychotherapy and psychological assessment services for children, adolescents and adults. Bayardo shared about the impact of this partnership at UPA.

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

The game changer for us, as far as I'm concerned, is when we connected with the Wright Institute and we have formed a relationship that I think is going on its eighth or ninth year, and they brought clinicians in training, like four to five and with an onsite supervisor. And then we were able to connect kids on campus with therapy. So when we first started UPA, I was the counselor, but we were all working with families, we were all working with kids and we were referring out to the community to mental health organizations, but a lot of times our students were on waiting lists for a very long time, and that was very concerning. And I felt like the girl in that story where there's a dam holding back the water and there's all these little holes, and I was trying to put fingers on all the holes to keep the dam from breaking. And it was very challenging. You know, I was doing a lot of check-ins with kids, but I wasn't really providing the therapy they needed at that moment.

**Lan Nguyen:**

Dr. Tracy Smith, Clinical Faculty and Director of the school-based collaborative at the Wright Institute supervises the therapists that provide care to UPA students through that program. She has also been a part of the Wright Institute's partnership with UPA since the partnership began in 2014. Dr. Tracy Smith shared some of the conditions that contribute to a successful and long-lasting collaboration between her organization and the school communities they partner with.

**Tracy Smith:**

Part of that needs assessment and the relationship building is really to assess does the school have the capacity to hold the mental health work? Meaning do they value it and are they going to support it? And the schools that we've lasted at for up to a decade are schools where really the principal and a large portion of the staff really see the importance of addressing young people's mental health as a part of their ability to succeed in school. So Bayardo, I mean, she got so creative with space at UPA for us, really made sure that we had dedicated space. Every single year she would sit down with me with a calendar and a room schedule and say, okay, I'm going to prioritize the Wright Institute. Finding something like a confidential therapy room sounds so small, but sometimes it's the biggest obstacle for many of our schools is that they don't have space to accommodate a space for us to be. And I think part of the reason this partnership has lasted for so long is that the adult community at UPA recognizes the importance of therapy. They value it, they respect it, and they themselves are quite healthy. When I say healthy, I mean overall health, meaning they're good at their jobs and they're also good at understanding that it's not just about the academics, that there are other things that come into play.

**Lan Nguyen:**

Dr. Tracy Smith went on to discuss some of the complexities of providing mental health supports to children and youth.

**Tracy Smith:**

There's got to also be an understanding of the fact that people are experiencing isolation and stress around immigration and deportation, that they're concerned that they don't have enough money to feed their family, that they're also dealing with intergenerational trauma. That there's got to be a very explicit conversation too around the things that young people are experiencing that again, aren't their own. And that's another place I think UPA really holds well is that they understand that kids are coming from all different iterations of family and iterations of belongingness and iterations of access. And so are we. I don't think that therapy is a magic bullet or it's a solution to everything. Not everyone needs therapy. Some people need a job, some people need a tutoring program. But I do feel like, if anything I want to say is I do feel like young people's developing minds and developing brains are really, they're really tender.

And if we can just be a little bit kinder and gentler with their minds and their brains and their bodies and that we work hard to make sure our expectations match with what their capabilities are and that we give kids of color some space to navigate the extra work of being part of a marginalized group, and that we give queer kids a chance to navigate that they're part of an additional, you know, marginalized group and that we give immigrant kids... I wish we could give extra space to boys to not have to be men.

**Lan Nguyen:**

Since forming this partnership with the Wright Institute, UPA has launched additional partnerships with other local community-based organizations to continue to grow and strengthen its efforts to support the health and wellbeing of UPA students and families. Let's hear from Bayardo and UPA community school manager Glendy, about these important partnerships.

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

Three years ago, Oakland Unified School District said, do you need more therapy? I'm like, of course we do. And so, they sent us Wellness Together, and now for three years, we have a therapist one to two that are there three times a week to give kids therapy. We also have great organizations outside like Casa del Sol and the Hawthorne Clinic that also see some of our students.

**Glendy Cordero:**

When families are working and they don't have the time available due to the different financial needs that they have to take their kids to different doctor's appointments or dental or vision appointments or you know, mental appointments. Then we have that set up in our school with the supports within the school or next to our school with the Hawthorne Clinic, which is the health center that provides physical support for our students or health support for our students.

**Lan Nguyen:**

UPA is implementing programs that aim to ensure every student has a positive relationship with at least one adult on campus and is connected to an adult who can help them access services or supports. Here are Tierre and Bayardo to share about UPA's mentoring Initiative, Crew Class and Sown to Grow program.

**Tierre Mesa:**

We have a mentor program that really is to support our goal that every student feels connected to at least one adult on campus. And that that relationship is used for us to learn more about the child and for that child to feel more supported because we can't provide more like tier two/tier three support to students if we don't know what's going on. And for students to feel seen and heard. And in a class of 30, it's really hard for a classroom teacher to make that happen on a daily basis. So, our mentoring program, we have whole school mentor time for about 90 minutes each week, and every adult in the school building has mentees, including myself. Our goal is that every student gets a mentor check-in every two weeks. So, mentors are able to check in with half of their mentees each week... is what we are aiming to do.

And so, it's a time where when you walk around the school, like every adult is sitting and having a one-on-one conversation with a student. And that conversation is initially just like, "how are you, what's going on in your life? What are you excited about right now? What's been challenging?" Keeping it really open because maybe that student will share about something in school, maybe they'll share about something outside of school, and then kind of narrowing into those conversations around academic support as well. But that mentor relationship really serves as a support for students to feel like they have this positive relationship and connection with an adult, but also so that adult can then help connect them to various supports.

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

I also want to say that we have Crew, which is a Wednesday class where a Crew teacher gets to know her kids or his kids or their kids really well and also, does family conferences with them and really becomes their point person. And every Wednesday we have extended lessons, and through the years we've done circles, we're doing Second Step this year. There's a lot of talk about feelings and reactions and, you know, appropriate responses to deescalating stress or anger. So, it's something that's sort of in our Crew, and what's happened is we've really made therapy a cool thing at our school. I often have kids come up to me saying, "Hey, I'd like a therapist." I said, "Great, why do you need one?" "I don't know why, but I just thought it would be a good idea." And I'm like, "yeah, you know, let's check in."

"I'm going to ask you a few questions to sort of see if that's something you need or maybe you need something different." It has become a really cool thing. We also have a new tool this year that we did not have last year that I'm really pleased with, it's called Sown to Grow, and during mentor time on Wednesday morning, after a greeting, hearing all the announcements, the kids go ahead and they fill out their Sown to Grow and they rate themselves of how they're feeling. And there's usually a question like, "how is this week?" or "what's one goal you have for yourself?" or, you know, "what's something that's been stressing you out?" And so, they all take the survey, they rate themselves, and then I get all the responses that are flagged. So, if a kid says, "I'm really sad, my grandfather died." You know, that comes to me. If a kid says, "my cat's lost and I don't know if I'll ever find her again and I love her," that comes to me. And so, then my job on Wednesday morning is to follow up on every single one of those red alerts, and then I meet with the student, and I check in with them.

**Lan Nguyen:**

For young people who may have additional needs, a core component of UPA's mental health and wellness strategy is their coordination of services team or COST<sup>1</sup> team consisting of school staff and mental health providers. This multidisciplinary team meets regularly to assess the needs of individual students and the school community as a whole.

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

It was a journey from having one counselor and a lot of concerned, loving adults that acted as counselors to a school that now has a huge functioning COST team where people come together once a week to evaluate students, talk about students, and make plans. And the beautiful thing about those plans is we always come back the next week and we check through those actions so that nothing slips through the crack. We discuss cases like, "okay, here's a kid, this is what they need, who would be the best match for this kid? And okay, do you have a space? All right, I will write up the referral. I will get feedback from the teachers. You're going to take that kid." I keep a running list of everyone who has therapy, when they started, who they're with.

**Glendy Cordero:**

We evaluate not just the student need, but as well we evaluate if there is any needs within the family, like parents, you know, and other people that are supporting that child to become the best person of himself. Each COST meeting, each service is, in our case, personalized to our student's community and needs.

**Lan Nguyen:**

UPA has also woven Restorative Justice – or RJ – into the fabric of their school. Restorative Justice is an alternative to punitive approaches to school discipline and behavior management. It focuses on repairing harm through inclusive processes that bring students and educators together and support students in developing the social-emotional skills needed to confront challenges and engage in productive conflict. Terre and UPA alumni and Restorative Justice facilitator, Agustin, share their insights and experiences with RJ at the school.

**Tierre Mesa:**

You know, behavior is just a form of communication. It's how students are communicating their needs and traditionally schools respond to undesired student behavior with punishment and different ways to exclude them from the classroom or the school entirely. And I think we made a huge shift as a school when we recognized and named that students undesired behaviors are also a way that they're communicating that they have unmet needs and also undeveloped skills around how to communicate their needs. And so, our Restorative Justice work is really in partnership with our mental health supports

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<sup>1</sup>COST stands for Coordination of Services Team which constitutes a strategy for managing and integrating various learning supports and resources for students. COST teams identify and address student needs holistically and ensure that the overall system of supports works together effectively.

to help our students heal when their behavior harms others, communicate their feelings around the things they've done, or their empathy for others. And it's all connected, right?

**Agustin Barajas:**

With RJ and I think any form of mediation or restorative conversation, we try to create spaces for dialogue with students in order for them to be able to express and get everything out their chest of what's bothering them. Especially when it comes to conflict in the mix of having these conversations, right? These conversations are, you know, kind of similar to our mentor times, right? Because they come from a lens of understanding that our students need to develop skills in order for them to be able to solve the conflicts that come through every day. Like we try to have circles in classrooms, having moments of celebration for folks to be able to develop stronger community, you know? In RJ we have the saying "hurt people hurt people," right? But if you have a strong sense of community, there's less of a chance of there being harm being caused, right? And so I think my part in the work that we're doing is trying to recognize that students are growing and trying to develop their skills as young adults and also trying to be a part of that same, you know, the support that everybody is putting into in developing a stronger sense of community.

**Lan Nguyen:**

The Restorative Justice approach extends beyond the school walls and into students' homes. Glendy and Agustin share how Urban Promise Academy partners with families through UPA's family resource center and the impact they are seeing.

**Glendy Cordero:**

I have seen a lot of the families that used to be punitive to the students as parents now are holding this type of conversation. And when we had this conversation with them about it, they truly listen to it, and especially when we ask the question, "if you have been working with your child in the old system that right now, I personally don't believe in, why don't you try something new?"

**Agustin Barajas:**

With RJ, a lot of it's like a lens, and so the family resource center and Tierre, they're doing an amazing job in providing different lenses to families, right? So that they have a deeper understanding on the issues that their youth and their kids might be dealing with at school, right? Which then creates again, an empathy moment with families to recognize like, "oh, my son or my daughter or you know, my kid just might be dealing through some of this stuff" which allows for further conversations to happen at home or in school. And so, you know, some of those supports are talking with the principal. Some of those supports are the parenting classes that the family resource center provides, all of those created a lens for families to be able to have in understanding of what their children are going through.

**Lan Nguyen:**

Family engagement has been a key strategy since day one for Urban Promise Academy, especially around the work of destigmatizing mental health and working to make mental health and wellbeing concepts that are more accessible to the community. Finding and refining language and putting an emphasis on how to talk about these topics with families has always been front and center.

**Glendy Cordero:**

Part of what, was really helpful is to make sure that we learn a vocabulary that will be acceptable for families and just like learning what are the words that we need to be really careful to use and what is the best way to approach mental support for the families and students. We brought a lot of the services in person so the families can meet the people that was going to serve the students and make sure that they had experienced what the mental support in our school was about. I remember that there was some health nights that were held in which we talk about the privacy or confidentiality, trying to really shape what mental services were about. And on my behalf, try not to use the word "mental" support because when you mention "mental," the first answer to that is "mi hijo no esta loco... my son or my child is not crazy."

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

It is vocabulary, but I also want to point out is it's also about relationships and trust. Glendy has really built these relationships with these families from the first day she meets them.

**Lan Nguyen:**

Urban Promise Academy recognizes that while these programs are crucial to the success of students, they would not be possible without attending to staff wellbeing and to the relational trust among the adults on campus.

**Tierre Mesa:**

I do feel like we've effectively created a culture of care and there are times where we disagree with each other or really don't know what a student needs or what meets their needs or have various opinions on that. Conflict's kind of a strong word to use, but how do we navigate hard conversations? How do we lean in to support each other? Making sure we have ways in which we're checking in with adults, whether it's a one-on-one with Bayardo or me to just have a space to talk about what their stressors are and what they need for this work to feel sustainable and to be able to be centered in your own values and like that be how you respond to student behaviors is in connection with your values. You, yourself have to be well, right? And so I think that's ongoing work around how we support each other to set boundaries with the work to not do too much, so that we can show up the next day feeling well, how we can communicate effectively with each other when we disagree, and how to ask for what we need so that we're able to stay centered in the values that are important for supporting students.

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

You know, happy staff makes students happy, right? Because they keep coming back for more. So can't tell you the joy I feel that kids I used to chase around at recess, like "stop chasing him!" You know, and they're now sitting next to me in a staff meeting and we're doing a team building activity or we're talking about a student and how we're going to support them. I mean, people have said this about our school, and I don't say this lightly and I'm not saying it just because I'm the founder, but people say we're magical and I've had many therapists say the same exact, like, "this is unheard of!" Like they go to other schools, and they work there and they're like, "you have no idea how functional, how beautiful this school is."

**Lan Nguyen:**

In closing, Tracy, Agustin, Glendy, Bayardo, and Tierra each share their insights on the positive impact of Urban Promise Academy's school-based mental health system and the culture of care they have cultivated both within the school and throughout the community. They also share some advice for those interested in engaging in similar strategies.

**Tracy Smith:**

I think you have to start by talking with the community about what they want, like what they're imagining would be helpful. And then you can take that information and say like, "oh, would that look like this? Or would that look like that? Like, what would that look like?" And then in conversation and partnership, you can start to create some sort of scaffolding of what it could possibly look like.

**Agustin Barajas:**

Words like "community," "wellbeing" as much as they are words, they're also values. So, I think, you know, it takes a huge reflection, right? Of "what are your values and how are you going to like bring that out in order to have an impact in your community?" And so, I think it takes a lot of collective visioning with folks who share a similar vision as you.

**Glendy Cordero:**

Part of what the successful area of our school is, is not just working as a "my own" or "myself" – it's working all together to really unite forces and mainly is to support the students, but at the same time that we are supporting one student, we support the entire school community and outside of the community.

**Mary Ellen Bayardo:**

Visit schools that are doing the kind of work that you want to have happen at your school. I think visiting schools is super important. Also hiring the right people and not just the right people, but with the capacity to help support them to become leaders within the school. Not just a great teacher, but it's a teacher slash leader. So being able to provide those leadership opportunities and support for teachers only gives you a stronger community.

**Tierra Mesa:**



Ultimately, when we think about Tier One strategies for all students to support mental health, I think about, is school a joyful experience? Not only are we diagnosing needs and have systems to provide support but is their core experience at school one that's positive and a lot of that has to do with what are core beliefs and values as a school around how we interact with students and the value of a positive relationship and building rapport. And so that's like what holds this all together, right? Because often our students that need the most help don't automatically connect to the school experience unless we're intentionally working to make the school a place they want to be. I think, you know, grounding in your vision and having like a collaborative process with students, families and staff, having focus groups and really having buy-in from all of the stakeholders of the school about the importance of this work. And then in terms of like shifting systems, start small, right? We didn't do this overnight. This took 21 years for us to get here, but it also happened quicker once we were really clear about what it is we were working to do. But start small, build on your successes, with a clear vision around the goal.

**Lan Nguyen:**

Thank you to the Urban Promise Academy team for sharing how they are increasing access to mental and behavioral health services for youth in their community. We hope you enjoyed this audiocast, which is one part of a series of stories highlighting promising practices across California to support children and youth, mental and behavioral health and wellbeing. The series is supported by California's children and youth behavioral health initiative, a historic 4.7 billion investment by the state of California to enhance, expand and redesign the systems that support behavioral health for children and youth across the state.