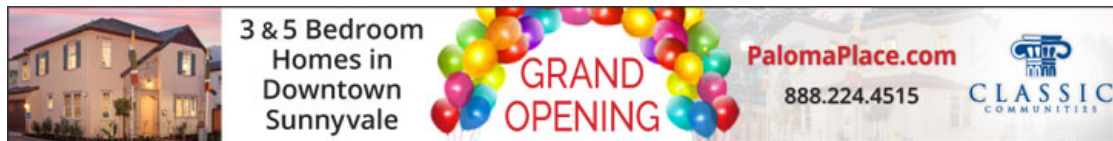



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Palo Alto school board approves \$50K to fund mental health services

Board members continue to be divided on mission of school-based services

by Elena Kadwany / Palo Alto Weekly

On Dec. 8, 2015, Palo Alto Unified school board member Ken Dauber proposed that the board approve \$200,000 in one-time discretionary funds to "provide more frontline mental health services to students" during the current school year.

His motion failed, but now, almost three months later, after raising the issue repeatedly, it passed — albeit with a much smaller sum of money and with only several months left in the school year.

The school board unanimously approved another motion Dauber made Tuesday night to set aside \$50,000 for staff to use at their discretion during this school year to support direct mental health services for students.

He pointed to disturbing statistics about the number of high school students (about 600) who reported in a recent district survey that they had considered suicide in the last year and the number of students (about 1,200) who had felt sad or hopeless. Dauber also expressed concern about the impact of Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS) shifting to a more short-term service model at the high schools that aims to cap students at 12 sessions (though this is flexible), then refer them to an external provider if necessary. The goal of the shift was to accommodate more students and eliminate long waitlists at the two high schools, which it has successfully done, staff have said.

However, a mid-year report from ACS indicates some shortfalls with the new model.

"While these changes were effective in managing our capacity to accept new referrals throughout the semester, it also created some mixed reactions from schools," the ACS report reads. "Some schools were in favor of having shorter term treatment, while others were concerned that students' needs would not be sufficiently met.

"These concerns were echoed by our site supervisors and interns. A significant portion of our students seen were not able to be served within a short-term treatment model due to the severity of presenting issues and their lack of access to mental health services outside school."

This fall, ACS served a total of 285 secondary students, 70 family members and 34 staff members, according to the report. ACS reported 1,238 individual sessions with students. Two were hospitalized due to suicidal ideation. The top five issues students present continue to be, in this order: academic stress, anxiety, communication with parents, depression and relationships, according to the report.

ACS Executive Director Philippe Rey told the district this week that his staff would like to gather more data and feedback on current services and then submit a formal proposal to the board in May "in which we will present best options to serve the student population of PAUSD," he wrote in an email provided to the



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In the meantime, staff now has access to the \$50,000, which they can use to support direct services without having to come back to the board for approval (and a longer process).

School board members were divided, as they were at a [separate budget meeting](#) earlier in the day on Tuesday, on the function and purpose of school-based mental health services.

"If it's helpful to have an approved amount of money to draw from without coming back to us, that's OK, but I'm little troubled by what's happening here," board member Melissa Baten Caswell said. "I feel like we don't understand what our mission is about providing mental health services for our kids. I shouldn't say we don't understand — I think we don't agree on it."

To Dauber, the district should be erring on the side of providing more services than not, especially in the wake of the suicide cluster that occurred in the last school year. To others, that would be taking on a role and responsibility that the schools are not equipped to do.

"I'm gong to say it — I don't think the schools are in the best position to provide significant mental health services," board member Camille Townsend said. "I believe we do a good job. We do better than most districts."

"I feel often times, every time we have a board meeting on this, it's like, 'We're in crisis; we have to do something more.' There is no end to that argument. I think we have to be very thoughtful about what services we are providing. What is the norm for school districts?"

Board President Heidi Emberling reiterated a point she made at a budget study session earlier in the day that a proposed district-level position for a health and wellness coordinator could help the district better align its efforts and vision for school-based mental health services.

"To have someone charged with this will help clarify so we don't have this sort of conversation again next year," she said.

The board also unanimously approved \$15,000 for this school year to fund ongoing direct services and parent-education classes provided by Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI) to Korean and Mandarin students and families.

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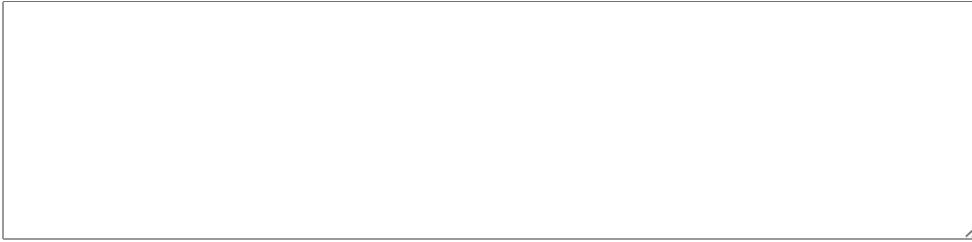
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