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## School board discusses student mental health

Officials consider 'Student Support Systems' committee, ask for a more refined focus

by Elena Kadvanly / Palo Alto Weekly

How the school district can best — and better — support student mental health was front and center at Tuesday's school board meeting, from an update on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's [forthcoming study of youth suicide](#) in the area to a staff proposal for a new wellness model.

While the CDC prepares to visit Palo Alto to conduct epidemiological field work next week on teen suicide risk factors, prevention strategies and more, the district is considering the creation of a committee that would take a comprehensive look at how to best deliver mental-health services to students.

The board provided feedback on the proposed "Student Support Systems" committee, which as proposed Tuesday would include 24 members — administrators, staff, students and parents from each high school — charged to "investigate, analyze, and recommend a comprehensive, effective, and innovative system of high school student support by December 2016 that ensures students thrive socially, emotionally and academically and are prepared for their futures in the 21st century," according to a staff report.

Members of both the district and high-school leadership teams collaborated to write the charge.

To most of the board, this charge was too broad, and several members asked for a more refined focus when the charge returns for action at the next board meeting. For Board President Heidi Emberling, this started with the name of the committee itself, which she called "jargony." (Others later suggested something like "guidance and counseling" instead.)

"Are we talking about a social-emotional learning plan, curriculum, guidance? Are we talking about academic, social-emotional and college and career counseling like we did in the GAC (Gunn's Guidance Advisory Committee)?" Emberling asked. "I'm a little concerned about that in terms of parameters, different expectations that we all have and the whole community will have. I don't know that we're there yet."

Other board members asked if this committee would consider more academic-focused topics — though ones that affect student health and well-being — such as laning, class size, Advanced Placemen (AP) classes and small learning communities.

Several board members also asked staff to add more parents and staff to the group's makeup. Associate Superintendent Markus Autrey said the initial proposal was to seek four administrators (including both high school principals), eight staff members (four from each high school), six students and six parents (half and half from each high school).

Board member Melissa Baten Caswell also suggested bringing in community members who might not have children in the district currently as well as recent alumni.

Board member Ken Dauber said parents, as attuned observants to how their children consume and are affected by services, in particular played a critical role in Gunn's advisory committee, which issued recommendations around the school's counseling model in 2013.

"I think it's important for a committee like this to have what I guess I could call a consumer focus," Dauber said. "This topic has had a lot of controversy. There's been a lot of contention around it. It will be more successful the more focused it is on student outcomes and what students are getting from the system."

While Dauber expressed support for one identified "criteria" of the committee — recommending a single



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model for student support to be implemented at both Palo Alto and Gunn high schools — board member Camille Townsend pushed back, calling it "autocratic, plastic (and) brittle."

"I want to respect that things have been done differently and some parents really like one kind of thing or the other," she said. "I'm not into breaking what's not broke. I do believe we can go faster than evolution, but there is somewhere in between there."

Currently, the high schools operate under different counseling models. Paly has long had in place a teacher-advisory model, which connects students with a teacher-advisor (TA) throughout their four years (one teacher their freshman year, and then another for the next three years). Gunn operates under a traditional counseling model, with a group of staff members providing guidance counseling, college and career advice and social-emotional support. Some community members and parents have previously urged that Gunn move to a TA model.

Several board members also stressed the importance of transparency throughout the committee's process. Baten Caswell said she heard members of Gunn's creative bell schedule committee last year were asked by the facilitator, Ken Yale (who will also serve as facilitator for this newly proposed group) to sign a confidentiality agreement. Jorge Quintana, the district's new communications coordinator, confirmed to the Weekly that the members did sign such an agreement.

"This is a public school (district). We don't do that," board member Camille Townsend said Tuesday. "I want people to be able to access the process."

Superintendent Max McGee said he would ask Yale to address these questions at the board's Feb. 23 meeting. Quintana wrote in an email Wednesday morning that a confidentiality agreement would not be part of the proposed student-support committee.

Several board members also urged that the committee host town halls early in their process to solicit feedback and engage with the public before their work is completed.

Despite her comments that the charge was too broad, Emberling argued that the committee should be looking at social-emotional learning and health from K-12, rather than just focused at the high-school level.

Research indicates that "limiting factors" of school-based social-emotional efforts are that "they're focused too narrowly in a piecemeal and unsystematic way on specific variables," Emberling said. "We do bullying prevention. We do substance abuse. We do sex ed. We look at delinquency. We do character development in our elementary schools. We do career prep. We do physical health and then mental health.

"We compartmentalize and we look at very narrow, very specific variables as opposed to a social-emotional learning curriculum that guides our students development over time. For me, this is an opportunity to look at this in a big way across our district."

The very next item the board discussed overlapped with this: A staff proposal to invest in exploring a more coordinated, comprehensive model for providing wellness series to students. While prioritization for such a model is being given to the high schools at this time, the benefit would be "building a replicable model to be used as a unified approach across the district over time," chief Student Services Officer Holly Wade wrote in a staff report. Wade is recommending the board commit \$25,000 this year to hire one or two contractors to develop a proposal for student and staff wellness models.

Staff said coordination of services, from direct services for students to even hosting parent-education events, is a "challenge" for the district. Two new mental-health coordinators, one for each high school, hired last spring were charged with bringing more strategic coordination each school's wellness services and related efforts.

The new model would bring everything from counseling and psychological services, health education and employee wellness to family engagement and community involvement under one roof. Staff has visited Tamalpais Union High School District recently to observe their version of the model and plans to also visit San Francisco Unified School District this month, Student Services Coordinator Brenda Carrillo told the board Tuesday night. Tamalpais Union, for example, has a dedicated [wellness center](#), and San Francisco Unified partnered with the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their Families and the San Francisco Department of Public Health to open [wellness centers](#) throughout its 19 campuses.

Gunn is currently in the process of creating its own wellness center, with the conceptual design for a new two-story building (the wellness center would be on the second floor) set to go to the Division of State Architect (DSA) for approval this month.

A coordinated school health model "moves us away from talking about services that are siloed and moving to this idea that services need to be integrated, aligned and coordinated," Carrillo said.

Conversation about the model led to questions about how well the current model is functioning, and whether or not students are still having difficulty accessing services as they have reported at board meetings and in community conversations over the last year.

The director of Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS), a Palo Alto nonprofit that provides on-campus counseling services at Paly and Gunn, [told the board in October](#) that his organization was working to reduce waitlists and meet a rising demand at the two schools, particularly in the wake of several teen deaths by suicide during the last school year.

Carrillo said Tuesday that the waitlists at Paly and Gunn have been reduced by shifting to a more short-



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term, school-based counseling model that limits students to eight to 12 sessions, then refers them to an external provider for more longer-term care. Previously, ACS interns on campus would see students for an entire school year or longer, she said, making it difficult for them to take on new students.

Dauber and Board Vice President Terry Godfrey expressed concern that that simply passes the problem onto another overloaded system.

Many parents, students and mental-health clinicians have said they face the same problem when trying to access external care in the community, with long waitlists to see quality health-care professionals close to home.

"How do we know there's enough capacity in the community to pick up the slack?" Godfrey asked. "Unfortunately, the anecdotal information and stories don't support that there's capacity outside of our walls."

"I, at least, have a fundamental concern that we're not addressing a clear need and in response to that clear need we're cutting services rather than stepping up and meeting them," Dauber echoed. "I would like to see a proposal that evaluates what the actual need is, that doesn't assume that there are resources in the community that I don't think are there and that really steps up to the question about how are we going to address our needs for students."

Carrillo said she would speak with the schools' ACS providers to get further information about how successful the schools' "warm hand-off" to external providers is and if students are able to access services outside of the schools.

One-time funding requests for exploring new wellness models, as well as money to expand services for Mandarin-, Korean- and Spanish-speaking families in the district for this school year, will return for action at the Feb. 23 board meeting.



## Comments

Posted by **Sarah1000**  
a resident of Los Altos  
18 hours ago

+ 8 people like this

As the parent of a child who has been diagnosed with major depressive disorder for over ten years, I can speak to the difficulty in finding youth mental health services in our community. Because we do not have a single hospital bed in our county for a youth who is having a mental health crisis, providers are reluctant to practice here. My son receives his psychological and psychiatric care in SF where there are many more providers because of the mental health programs at UCSF. The vast majority of parents who I know with children with mental health issues also must take their children out-of-county each week for care. The PAUSD board members are correct in questioning the availability of services in our community.

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Posted by **Data**  
a resident of Jordan Middle School  
16 hours ago

+ 6 people like this

The Board expressed dissatisfaction with the proposal. At least two Board members said it was not satisfactory. Didn't the Board request a plan for mental health services at Gunn and counseling? Administration delayed responding for many Board meetings. Dauber expressed his fear a response was delayed so many times, it could not be implemented before the end of the school year, and next school year the Board will have to start over. At the previous meeting the Superintendent promised the Board that Wade and Carillo would present the plan. The Administrators did not present what the Board requested. Task Forces and committees are more delays. I do not attend Gunn, any result is not something I can form an opinion on, but I have watched have important this is and the delays. Dauber deserves to at least have a proposal that can be discussed and voted, even if the Board votes "No".

From the article:

"Dauber echoed. "I would like to see a proposal that evaluates what the actual need is, that doesn't assume that there are resources in the community that I don't think are there and that really steps up to the question about how are we going to address our needs for students."

It is hard to believe after all this time, the Administration can't provide this most basic data. They have had since the reorganization approved last June, along with promotions and addition of senior managers.

Despite statements to Board members that reports of problems were anecdotal, they are obviously

still problems because people are telling the Board about them.

The Administration did not even know how many students are seen by it's counselors. It said requests for such basic information were "specific" and should be addressed in a "Weekly" newsletter to the Board (which fewer people will see than a Board of Education meeting). The Administrators should not go to an elected government body without this "specific" data in hand.

Related to the Administrators comments about elementary school counseling, the broad overarching statements of success without data are worrisome. The Administrators said the elementary program focuses on prevention and is effective. How can we know that it is effective? Elementary counselors do not start work until later in the school year, and leave before the school year ends. Services are based on teacher referral. Social emotional training cited is sporadic. If counseling declines to work with a child, there is no record. Records of services are not part of an IEP or IDP.

Administration said elementary services are provided by interns. How can we know that is effective? How can we know that every child is referred to counseling who needs it, that services are provided when needed and prevent emergencies, that children improve to the point that there are no emergencies? How do we know children do not regress if there are new interns every year, particularly without past records. How do we know if the focus on parent education as cited by the Administrators is effective, and if parents believe it helped?

The Administrators said most mental health problems start in school, so kids needing Counseling in High School may have needed it starting from elementary school. How do we know if they received it? Administrators said there is a focus on parent education. How can we know if parents and teachers receive adequate training to prevent future problems and emergencies in future grades, including middle and high school?

For Administrators not to know is one problem. A worse problem is to submit proposals without service and effectiveness data, which they should possess. The worst problem of all is to make broad statements of effectiveness and success without facts to support it.

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Posted by **Marc Vincenti**  
a resident of Gunn High School  
16 hours ago

+ 3 people like this

Hi, Fellow Onliners,

These proposals, though backed by good intentions, will fail for the same reason that all such proposals have so far failed.

We must stop trying to fix our kids. We must instead fix our schools. They suffered four deaths and hospitalized 50 students last year.

And now this: more support programs, more counselors and therapists, more "social emotional" curriculum, more wellness centers, more lessons or lectures or assemblies on mental health or depression or suicide--we're making our kids wear gas masks instead of getting rid of our schools' toxic fumes.

What are those fumes?

Palo Alto's high-school classrooms are overcrowded to the point where working relationships between kids and teachers--let alone the kinds of connections that can become lifelines--have become stunted. Last semester our two schools had 705 classes with 26 or more students, 407 with 30 kids or more.

Why do we put our kids into an impoverished environment when we live in a wealthy district!?

Second, our schools are parched by overwork and fatigue. Though our District recommends no more than two AP courses per student, the warning has been too feeble to deter 680 high-schoolers, this year, from taking three, four, five or more AP--college-level courses that, studies show, offer no advantage for college admissions but have our kids burning the midnight oil.

For families contemplating such loads, a timely half hour of guidance counseling could preserve hours and hours of sleep-time (not to mention family time, free time, friendship time) but our local officials have refused this simple fix.

Overloaded with APs (and with homework amounts in which they're given no nightly, expeditious, online voice), our high-schoolers are averaging 6.5 hours of sleep per night when they should be getting nine, say Palo Alto's pediatricians--who cite the risks for cognitive retention, poor concentration, depression. Multiply the nightly deficit and our average high-schooler, over one school

year, IS LOSING SEVENTY FULL NIGHTS OF SLEEP.

Why don't we act?!

Our system sends grade reports home twelve times per year; it used to be four. If you're a normal adolescent--perhaps enduring a break-up, a parental divorce, a humiliation on social media, loss of a grandparent--how are you supposed to heal, recover, bounce back when you're under a continual G.P.A. gun?

And how can you feel any peace of mind when cheating is rampant--when six of ten kids copy others' homework, five of ten steal test answers or questions, four of ten plagiarize, and a three-year cheating conspiracy of twenty students lifted some of them into prestigious colleges?

Abandoned by the adults who ought to be "upstanders," our kids are awash in moral queasiness, eroding self-esteem, and transactional friendships.

To this toxic environment, this year, has come some relief: a less stressful bell schedule at one of our schools, and the elimination of early-morning, eye-rubbing classes in which 10% of kids were enrolled.

But the relief is being cancelled out.

In a world where the titles of books on raising teenagers are flashing simultaneously red--"over-scheduled," "over-stressed," "overloaded," "over-parented," "over-tested"--we are giving our high-schoolers MORE to do and, as seen in this article, are about to give them even MORE.

We've invented helicopter schooling.

Let's take action. If you'd like our schools to stop passing out gas masks and instead get rid of the fumes--the toxic school conditions mentioned above--please join 424 other community members in the grassroots coalition Save the 2,008.

Everyone is welcome. We're a commonsense plan to bring real hope, not false hope, to Palo Alto's high-schoolers.

We're at savethe2008.com and will be a story on ABC News "Nightline" next week.

Sincerely,

Marc Vincenti  
Gunn English Dept. (1995-2010)  
Campaign Coordinator  
Save the 2,008  
savethe2008@gmail

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Posted by **Data**  
a resident of Jordan Middle School  
15 hours ago

+ 4 people like this

@ Marc Vincenti - Board members did express disappointment that the plan did not address class size reduction. It's doubtful it will be addressed in time for any budget review meetings approaching in February.

Your statement:

"These proposals, though backed by good intentions, will fail for the same reason that all such proposals have so far failed."

Did the Administration really present a serious proposal? Didn't seem like it.

Some parts of it should be fine. For example Korean translators should succeed if they are competent and if there are families who only speak Korean and not English. It's just not enough, and they knew that. They thought they would put off the Board, and then say they did what the Board told them.

Your statement:

" And now this: more support programs, more counselors and therapists, more "social emotional" curriculum, more wellness centers, more lessons or lectures or assemblies on mental health or depression or suicide--we're making our kids wear gas masks instead of getting rid of our schools' toxic fumes."

It's not that any of the above are bad. Individually most of them are quite good, and could help students. It's the slap-dash way the District implements them, with the many different programs

everywhere, even within the same school that is wasteful. The District says it will achieve them all, that it is already effective and that it IS coordinating them all, but its not. It couldn't possibly. Families who have dealt with the two Administrators before can spot this tactic right away. They overblow their achievements with vague statements that don't really support their claims.

The Board oversight is weakened because they have no idea what ensuring the emotional well being of thousands of students truly costs and involves.

It's much easier for Administrators to say they did it than to actually measure their own lack of achievement.

Your contention the District gives false hope is apt. They do a little of something, claim full achievement and then flutter off.

I heard Board members saying at multiple meetings some of the above were poorly implemented. For example, taking away exercise time in P.E. to substitute Mindfulness Breathing exercises. Isn't that a curriculum change, that the Board should have agreed to? How did this happen? Mindfulness is something students have to be willing to practice. Forcing them to do it is none sense. And it's something that has to be worked on constantly, consistently, over time. A lecture here and there teaches nothing.

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Posted by **Question**  
a resident of Another Palo Alto neighborhood  
14 hours ago

+ 2 people like this

Can someone please tell us what is happening with the CDC BEFORE it happens? Who is coming here, what is their mandate, what is their area of expertise, and what are they coming here to do? The CDC is a large agency. The other thing I wonder is if they will be pathologizing our district without really knowing us, like that Atlantic article (hit and run), while ignoring that neighboring districts are very similar but don't have the serious mental health problem? Will they be coming with fresh eyes and doing a real review, or are they being used by admin so they can use the tragedies to get what they want like they did with the supplemental tax?

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Posted by **CDC Presentation**  
a resident of Adobe-Meadow  
11 hours ago

+ Like this comment

@Question - there was a long presentation at the board meeting on this. Here's the link. [Web Link](#)

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Posted by **Question**  
a resident of Another Palo Alto neighborhood  
11 hours ago

+ 2 people like this

@CDC Presentation,  
Thanks for the info, but unfortunately, it still didn't answer my question. CDC and CDPH are big agencies. The presentation was no more specific than that or saying they were going to look at "data". What data? What people and what is their expertise?

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Posted by **Question**  
a resident of Another Palo Alto neighborhood  
11 hours ago

+ 2 people like this

The presentation said CDPH asked CDC to come here - I thought the district asked. In either case, who? Why did CDPH ask? Why the focus on media, when the surrounding communities got the media, too (yet didn't add to the clusters).

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