



GoodTimes



SUPPORT SERVICE Pajaro Valley Unified School District Student Services Coordinator Ben Snyder talks about the district's new Family Engagement Wellness Center on the E.A. Hall Middle School campus. PHOTO: TARMO HANNULA

Testing Wellness

Local school districts put new emphasis on student and family mental health **BY TODD GUILD & DREW PENNER**

As thousands of students throughout Santa Cruz County prepared to return to classrooms for the start of the new school year over the past three weeks, educators and administrators were not only honing their lesson plans, but also preparing for how to deal with the complications of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Because the past two years saw young people worldwide move to distance-learning regimes, in-person classes are still far from normal for many kids. This has in many cases compounded trauma for

students already facing such issues as poverty, hunger and violence.

Educators have had to look for ways to adapt to this changing landscape. For Pajaro Valley Unified School District, this includes the creation of its first Family Engagement and Wellness Center, which opened at E.A. Hall Middle School near downtown Watsonville in December. It is here that the more than 18,000 students of the largest school district in the county and their families can access services from several nonprofits, in addition to receiving food from Second

Harvest Food Bank.

While offering such services at schools is not a new idea, the Wellness Center represents a shift toward bringing the students' families into the loop, says PVUSD Student Services Coordinator Ben Snyder.

Among other things, the families can attend classes on topics such as positive discipline, dealing with depression and bullying.

"We recognize we need to focus and serve the whole child, and we have been doing that for many years," Snyder says. "But we have now shifted that focus to

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the whole parent and the whole community as well.”

HOLISTIC APPROACH

Slyder says that the trauma stemming from the pandemic has a wide-ranging impact that can hinder students’ long-term academic plans.

“Having a place like [the wellness center] allows for those connections between the adults and students, to help individuals think of those goals and have hope in knowing that, ‘Yes, this is where I am now,’ but recognizing it doesn’t have to be that way,” he says. “We can move forward in a different way. And having adults here on campus to help support that transformation is at the core of what we do here at the wellness center.”

For PVUSD mental health clinician Nancy Broxton—a licensed marriage and family therapist—this philosophy is paramount.

“I know that helping to support the whole family is one of the most important things I can do in order to change a kid’s life,” she says.

Santa Cruz City Schools spokesman Sam Rolens says that the district is in the process of launching similar wellness centers at its high schools. That effort, Rolens says, is funded in part by

Measures T and U, \$110 and \$208 parcel taxes, respectively, that were approved in 2020.

In addition, socio-emotional counselors train teachers in how to spot signs of distress or anxiety among their students, Rolens says.

The district’s efforts to focus on student mental health goes beyond those additions. For instance, all SCCS students beginning in third grade have annual check-ins with counselors to see if anyone needs support, Rolens says. Using Covid-19 relief funding, SCCS recently added mental and emotional health counselors at all its middle and high schools.

Similarly, the Santa Cruz County Office of Education (COE) is in the process of creating two new wellness centers at the other high school districts by the time class starts in fall 2023.

And the need for such services is more vital than ever. According to data gathered by the COE, the rates of suicidal thoughts and depression among LGBTQ+ students rose from 64% during pre-pandemic 2019 to 71% last year. That’s compared to an increase from 28% to 39% among non-LGBTQ+ students during that same period.

It is this growing need for mental health services that drove Scotts Valley Unified School District to

make its top two priorities for this school year (1) diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging and (2) mental health, according to Superintendent Tanya Krause.

Krause says district officials were expecting problems with learning loss to crop up when students returned to the classroom. But it was the emotional challenges that caught them off-guard.

“Our biggest surprise upon returning to in-person instruction was the mental health issues that superseded some of the academic challenges that we were more prepared for,” she says.

To meet this challenge, SVUSD has upped its counseling roster. Krause says when she took over as superintendent in 2016 the district had just 2.2 equivalent counselors at the high school. Now there are 5.3 equivalent counselors between the middle school and the high school.

SVUSD is also increasing its emphasis on socio-emotional learning, and the district’s Food Service Department now provides free breakfast and lunch every day.

These changes follow a challenging year for SVUSD in which a freshman named Mateo Deihl died by suicide. His mom, Regina, said he had been bullied at school largely because he was Latino. A

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recent report from an education consultant hired by SVUSD found that many parents at the district feel the environment isn't the friendliest for students of color or who are part of other minority groups.

A major takeaway from the report was that many parents aren't confident in the district's commitment to following through on addressing their concerns. But Krause says SVUSD is getting serious about fixing bullying problems, including by introducing a new discipline policy.

"We will have a greater emphasis on responses to hate speech for students," she says. "We spent a big chunk of time with our leadership team talking about making sure students are really clear at the beginning of the year about what the expectations are."

According to Krause, these situations tend to crop up before or after class and can fly under the staff's radar. So, the district has started training yard duty workers, campus security and support employees on how to identify and deal with these scenarios.

The district knows that the social media world is another arena where this abuse has been rearing its ugly head, and Krause emphasizes they're working to reduce bullying there too, where possible.

"While it's oftentimes occurring outside of the school hours, the school is expected to respond to those types of situations," she says. "So, a piece of what we're going to be doing is partnering with an outside trainer to provide parent training."

Because, after all, these issues are much bigger than the district, she adds.

"This is not just a school district focus, but a change in our community; and in our state—and in our nation," she says. "And we're hoping that our parent community will support and partner with us as we move with a greater focus in this direction."

CHANGING TIDE

The PVUSD Wellness Center brings the services of Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, Salud Para la Gente and Community

Action Board under one roof, in addition to nutrition services.

This is not the only place in PVUSD to receive such services. Watsonville and Pajaro Valley high schools have their own resource centers, as do Pajaro, Rolling Hills and Cesar Chavez middle schools, where students can access services that include Dientes Community Dental.

But the Family Engagement and Wellness Center is the first created as a "one-stop shop," offering a comprehensive range of services.

One room is designated as the "co-op," which is packed full of shelves, all stocked with food from Second Harvest, where families can select food twice per week. This includes peanut butter, rice, milk, pasta and more.

The center also coordinates with Martha's Kitchen—a 40-year-old organization based in San Jose that makes meals for homeless people—to provide hot meals once a week for the families.

"I can feed them," she says. "I can take them right next door to the Food Bank. I can solve that immediate problem, and then figure out how we can help. How do we change the home and how do we change everything? And then deal with the trauma. Because if I'm not doing the basics first then I can't get to the therapeutic part."

Last year, Broxton says she served roughly 70 students throughout the school district and reckons she'll see anywhere from 30-40 families at any given time.

While she says that the importance of counseling services in a post-pandemic world cannot be overstated, Broxton adds that she has seen one positive: an unprecedented growth in acceptance of such services.

Rolens agrees, saying that his district has seen an increase in students seeking and receiving mental health consultations.

"This generation of students has gotten more comfortable with the idea," he says. "We're seeing more need in terms of mental health support. We're just so happy we have the infrastructure to meet that need right now. We want people to use these services as much as they need them." ■