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## Education foundation donations critical for high school student wellness during pandemic

By Jenn Freedman



Photo Shirley DeFrancisci

increased early interventions for students experiencing social-emotional or mental health challenges that may be affecting learning in the classroom.

Wellness programs have a proven ability to support students with academics and increase engagement in the school community. Each Wellness Center offers individual/group counseling (primarily telehealth with limited in-person), crisis support, and other interventions aimed at addressing a multitude of teen-related issues: stress, depression, bullying, gender questions, grief, drug/alcohol abuse, and anxiety. They also offer group sessions for parents/guardians and training for teachers and staff.

AUHSD Superintendent, Dr. John Nickerson, explains, "The origin of our Wellness Centers are rooted in declining mental health data we have seen with our students. Adolescence brings so many challenges today that that didn't exist even 10 years ago. Given there is no state funding for the degree of mental health support our students need, the support of our education foundations has been absolutely critical to advance toward our vision for the Wellness Centers. And we were seeing some signs of modest improvement in mental health data since the Centers have been open. With the pandemic, however, the social-emotional and mental health needs of our students have increased dramatically. Our education foundation support for the Centers has never been so important for our students."

During distance learning, Wellness Centers have adapted their programs and outreach to optimize student support. All four centers visited virtual classrooms in the fall to ensure every freshman and sophomore had a face-to-face experience. Wellness teams have also shared curriculum about suicide prevention and awareness to all students.

School sites are also adapting to the specific needs of their students. For example, at Campolindo High School, the Wellness Center offers lunchtime Zoom hangouts each week, including a ninth-grade hang to connect with other freshmen, a LGBTQ+ hangout, and a vision board hangout. The Acalanes High School center also offers wellness classes and activities like journaling, games, and mindfulness practice. Miramonte's Wellness Center recently surveyed students and is now developing affinity spaces for specific student groups like Students of Color Group and LGBTQ+ Group. And the Las Lomas High School center is implementing mindful Monday classes and is also training peer educators for tobacco use prevention.

While the Wellness Centers are sufficiently supporting student needs during distance learning, the demands will shift and increase as schools shift back to in-person learning. Assistant Superintendent Amy McNamara warns, "We're taking a deep breath, knowing that it will be very challenging when students return to campus in the fall. Chaos in households from job loss and social isolation, and the trauma that comes with loneliness are all factors that we will need to address with students when they return."

Each education foundation raises funds for the town's school district serving students from TK through eighth grade, as well as the town's high school. These foundations are connected through their mutual support for the AUHSD. The Moraga Education Foundation supports Campolindo, Lafayette Partners in Education supports Acalanes, Orinda Network for Education supports Miramonte, and Walnut Creek Education Foundation supports Las Lomas.

Community support is critical because of the insufficient state funding public schools receive in Lamorinda. California ranks 41st in the nation for per pupil funding of public schools, and 48th for counselors per

student (with 663 students for one counselor).

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