

MINUTES FOR MEETING OF JUNE 24, 2009

Opening

The School City Liaison Committee held a meeting in Room A, 25 Churchill Avenue, Palo Alto, California. The meeting was called to order at 8:20 a.m.

City of Palo Alto

John Barton, Council Member
 Larry Klein, Council Member
 Scott Wong, Palo Alto Police Dept. (Lt.)
 Rich Bullerjahn, Palo Alto Police Dept. (SRO)
 Con Maloney, Palo Alto Police Dept. (Sgt.)
 Bob Beacom, Palo Alto Police Dept. (Capt.) Adam Howard
 Rob DeGeus, Recreation Dept.
 Dennis Burns,
 Gary Betts,

Palo Alto Unified School District

Camille Townsend, Board Member, Chair of Committee
 Melissa Baten Caswell, Board Member
 Bob Golton, CBO
 Ginni Davis, Education Services
 Carol Zepecki, Student Services
 Tina Allen, Secretary, Superintendent's Office

Others Present

Victor Ojakian
 Jessica Lewis
 Becky Beacom, Palo Alto Medical Foundation
 Diana Samuels, Palo Alto Daily News
 Linda Bendor

Oral Communications

There were no requests to speak.

Approval of Minutes – April, 2009

MOTION: Barton moved to approve the minutes from the May 27, 2009 meeting. Baten Caswell seconded. Motion carried 4-0.

Introductions were made.

Response to Recent Student Mental Health Needs

Zepecki said this topic focused on the recent tragedies, but she also wanted to look at the broader picture of student mental health. She then discussed current offerings to students, such as increased counselor support, a Palo Alto High School teacher advisor program, intern counselors from Adolescent Counseling Services at all secondary schools, three-session referral process, elementary counselors at most schools, Lucille Packard Children's Hospital, counselors and behavioral support at all secondary schools, and Department of Mental Health Support Under 26.5 (which is suffering some budget cuts). She said more social-emotional issues are being seen now than in the past, and staff know a number of students who are at risk. Some issues are anxiety and depression, which sometimes stem from childhood attention deficit issues. SHARE (Student Health Awareness and Research Education) focuses on parent education and treatment. Many parents are now having trouble finding psychiatric help for their students. In addition, a number of families are suffering from financial difficulties. Also, transitions are difficult, and a number of suicides occur during these times. Baten Caswell asked how PAUSD compared to the general state or national situation in regard to

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student socio-emotional health. Zepecki said PAUSD was not very different from the state norms. Townsend said that there was high stress especially in low income areas due to economic uncertainty. Zepecki said there was a very active Drug and Alcohol Collaborative, and a grant had been written. Beacom said prevention was becoming a stronger focus. Zepecki said an annual social norms survey had been done the past few years. Another issue for students is "success", when students are trying to determine the best way to succeed. Technology is yet another potential issue, such as how to respond to a dark message on Facebook. Townsend said a bigger issue than technology may be isolation and loneliness, and that making connections may be difficult for some students. Barton said students who don't have a connection tend to fall prey to these issues. He said this was a weakness in high schools, as they do not make sure every student finds a connection.

De Geus said the City was focusing on after school efforts, such as the Teen Center, which is attended mostly by middle school students. Summer Camp is also a big program, with over 5,000 students enrolled this summer. The middle school athletic program supports almost 1,400 students this year. The gap appears to be at the high school level, as it is hard to get high school students to participate in any organized activities. Townsend asked if the high schools also saw it as a gap. De Geus said he did not believe the connection between the City and the high schools was as strong as it could be. Baten Caswell said one challenge was that some things that seem great for high school students just are not popular among teenagers. De Geus said an informal event or place for kids to go seem to be needed. A representative from the teen center said it is a drop in center, but there are also scheduled activities each day. A lot of things planned are interesting to high school students, but their stress levels often prohibit participation. De Geus said Positive Alternatives for Youth, for at risk teens, was cut a few years ago, however the former leader of that project was now at Ventura.

Zepecki then spoke about support at Gunn after the suicides, noting that a few students were also hospitalized. She said counseling staff immediately came onto campus, and at risk students were immediately contacted, as were their parents. There were also after school sessions for teens to come in and talk, hosted by the Center for Living with Dying. The Center also met with PAUSD staff and parents after the first suicide, and were very helpful. Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS) was at Gunn working with students for several days after the suicides. She said she had also had individual meetings with individuals and groups. She also met with a number of experts, including experts in the community. A coordinating community committee needs to be formed so all groups can come together and coordinate efforts. In addition, a "public message" must be formed to handle media and have a uniform message. In the District, more than just talking is needed. The Crisis Intervention Plan must be studied and possibly revised, so some guidelines would be in place in a crisis. She also suggested a number of actions, including looking at curriculum, staff training for this year and years to come, student training either as part of the curriculum or as separate assemblies, and use of screening mechanisms.

Zepecki suggesting thinking about topics like: prevention, response, recovery, who does research, data collection, Crisis Intervention Team training, and utilizing suicide hotlines. Baten Caswell said she had heard teens were much less likely to use suicide hotlines. Zepecki said this was one option, though she realized it might not be popular. If just one or two students benefit, however, it is worth it to keep the program in place. Peer support is another area to consider. Baten Caswell said it was clear that social networking tools, such as Facebook, are support tools for many teens. Zepecki said this had been discussed, and there were both positives and negatives to each of these tools. She said technology had been discussed at the PAMF (Palo Alto Medical Foundation) meeting she recently attended. Peer counseling programs at colleges are also being studied. She said she wanted everyone to be aware of what was out there, then determine what works for PAUSD and apply it in a systemic way.

Townsend thanked the five Police Department representatives for attending this meeting, then asked what training the police received around health and adolescent issues. Wong said continuous professional training was administered for crisis intervention, and Police Academy graduates

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received six hours of state mandated training. In addition, designated officers in the department work with the hostage negotiation team and the SWAT team. These officers have extra training in crisis intervention. Townsend asked if there was a specialized team for working with students who have been hospitalized. Wong said there often was not enough time to get a team together, so the first officer to respond would have to handle the situation. The Department also did parent training and suicide discussion, which was supported by four officers. Townsend asked what kind of training Bullerjahn had received. He said he had attended a 40-hour CIT (Crisis Intervention Training) class developed by the San Jose Police Department and mental health professionals, and funded by pharmaceutical companies. The training included learning about different mental conditions, how to recognize them, meeting with people suffering from those conditions in order to learn about their experiences. It was noted that the former Police Chief was the mental health coordinator and was responsible for the training of all officers and dispatchers. Zepecki added that she had received e-mails from people concerned about their neighbors, and she was told to refer them to the Police. Baten Caswell said Skelly had send out a list of warning signs to be aware of after the second student suicide, and she wondered where this list of signs and resources could be available to everyone. Zepecki said this was part of the systemic aspect, and this information should be sent out to every teacher every year.

Zepecki then discussed stakeholders, such as ACS, media, medical and psychiatric professionals, the faith community, and Cal Train. These people would all want to be involved in a coordinated effort. Baten Caswell said local private schools would also like to be involved.

Regarding next steps, Townsend noted that there were two upcoming meetings for the school district. Linda Bendor, a community member, said she appreciated how this was being handled by Zepecki, and added that many kids move back and forth between public and private schools, so she encouraged involvement with private schools. She suggested that Zepecki work over the summer to contact students to be involved in the planning process as well.

De Geus said it was good that a number of programs existed, then said there was still a culture of stress among students and it needed to be a focus. There was also a Youth Marshall plan, created in 2002, and this ought to be reworked. Ojakian said half the group was youths, so it would be a great program to refocus on. De Geus also emphasized the importance not only of kids with adults, but also among adults in the community, forming stronger connections among the different available services. He also said he had participated in JLS exit interviews, and during a few of these interviews a few students with problems were identified, and staff would track them through high school.

Barton said high schools need to be radically rethought and what it means to be a teenager in Palo Alto. Some kids are currently benefited, but a lot of kids are not engaged in education. This community has the resources, and the starting point needs to be much broader than the six bullet points in Zepecki's presentation. Townsend said the suicide issue was a separate issue, and suggested focusing the discussion on that now, as this was what the City council had requested. Baten Caswell said the community needed to see some progress, and this could be achieved by choosing a few specific things to start on. She said a number of teachers were very uncomfortable in supporting students after the tragedies, so teacher training could be one of the first tasks. She acknowledged that stress was in the culture here, and it was hard to change. Mental health is something that really has been missed, and it must be distinguished from stress, which can exacerbate existing mental health issues.

Becky Beacom said the California Healthy Kids survey would be done, and would include questions on suicide this fall, per Scott Laurence's request. Townsend agreed that not everything can be done at once, and that Zepecki is trying to narrow the list down to a few things to be undertaken at this point. She said it is important to get good information out to the media, and guidelines for handling these issues are needed. She said there were guidelines for preventing copycat suicides as well. Zepecki asked who should pull people together, then suggested the medical community should be

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doing this.

Klein asked if neighboring jurisdictions were finding that stress levels were increasing in their areas too. Zepecki said this was the case. Klein asked if she had any theories. Zepecki said a number of factors come into play. One is that more kids have more complex neurologically-related issues, and sometimes Attention Deficit is the beginning. Klein said he was struck by a disconnect in the aftermath of the two suicides, when he heard that many students said their counselors were worthless. Zepecki said counselors received training, and the stigma of counseling and the teenage view of counseling were also being discussed. Students also needed to be familiar with the counselors beforehand to achieve more benefit, than with a counselor they don't already know. One thing to look at is how to encourage people to tell the district about issues, such as psychiatric histories of their students. Also, many parents feel like they are the only ones who are going through particular problems, when they really are not unique.

A community member asked if there were any group counseling sessions for kids. Zepecki said they were, and there was facilitated dialog among students, although there is not a formal peer to peer counseling project at this time. This would require very careful planning and training to be sure it is effective. The community member suggested that it might help struggling kids to know that others are experiencing the same issues. Baten Caswell said that counseling can take a long time for some kids.

Bendor suggested that everyone continue to make use of experts in clusters of suicides. Many questions need to be considered, such as what is being missed and how to build a support network. In addition she asked if enough information has been gathered in a careful, sensitive, professional way that will enable the community to make better decisions. She also said Stanford also having mental health issues among their students, so engaging Stanford in this discussion could be beneficial.

Zepecki said discussions had occurred about which group should head up this work, possibly the City or PAMF. She was thinking this would be someone who would provide the facility, make sure people were invited, and ensure that minutes were taken. Each group would choose its representatives, and discuss its plans, and possibly coordinate with others. She also suggested the media should be involved, and that the District should be involved, but should not direct the work. Townsend asked who the City's point people were on this. Emslie said this was an overlapping area involving law enforcement and people who organize activities. Klein said he was unsure of what was being coordinated, as some people were talking about frontline suicide prevention and others were talking about stress. Townsend said suicide was on her mind right now with the recent tragedies, and she would prefer to move on this because it is more defined. Baten Caswell agreed that more focus was needed, but was unsure whether the focus should be suicide prevention or student mental health. Beacom said that from a public health standpoint, both were needed. She suggested everyone look at what they can do. She said environmental pieces contribute to emotional well-being, and a long term approach is important. De Geus said that if the Youth Master Plan was to be updated, he would like to play a major role. The mental health training piece is something that can be done now. Baten Caswell said students and parents should also be included in this. Ojakian said he was on the Student _____ Advisory committee, and PANDA training involved training people in the community to handle crises, so this could be used as a model. Emslie agreed he would talk with the City and pull together a group. Baten Caswell suggested Beacom talk to people at Stanford Medical about this. Beacom said a huge effort had already begun.

Townsend suggested discussing this issue again as a group in October. Emslie suggested forming a working group over the summer, which would report back to this committee in the fall.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:48 a.m.