

At a February 13, 2011 community meeting, members of the audience submitted questions for the Palo Alto Unified School District staff. District staff took the questions and responded in the following categorized themes:

- Focused Goal
- Student Connectedness
- School Climate
- Mental Health Support for Students
- Training
- Questions for the Superintendence

### **Questions on the Focused Goal**

**Q: *What has changed***

**A:** In May of 2008, the Palo Alto Unified School District school board approved a strategic plan. In Section A, the district commits to make efforts improve to the following 2010-2011 focused goal.

Focused Goal: Academic Excellence and Learning

- Improve student connectedness and strengthen support systems for student social, emotional, physical health
- Encourage site-developed approaches to improve student connectedness
- Continue and strengthen the relationship with Project Safety Net (PSN) Task Force Identify strategic opportunities through Project Cornerstone survey results
- Develop a multi-year systematic approach to these complicated issues

This focused goal gives us the opportunity to work with staff and parents on the social-emotional development of our students. To improve student connectedness and strengthen support systems for students, the District is working in conjunction with Project Cornerstone ([www.projectcornerstone.org](http://www.projectcornerstone.org)), a county non-profit organization helping communities build asset-rich environments for the youth. The 41 Developmental Assets model provides a framework for building resiliency and other positive character traits amongst youth. This effort is in partnership with (PSN) and community agencies for a common vision and language for what youth and teens need to thrive.

In part this focused goal is intended to strengthen the District's relationship with PSN. The District signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with PSN for the 2010-2011. Items on the MOU include:

- Align District focused goals to PSN ([completed Fall 2010](#))
- Provide a senior level position in District to support the implementation of PSN strategies ([completed Fall 2010](#))
- Allocate funds up to \$5,000 from SERV grant for the construction of a website ([completed October 2010](#))
- Implement the 41 Developmental Assets and philosophy in the District ([in progress](#))

- Plan, coordinate, and communicate the administration of Project Cornerstone student survey (completed October 2010)
- Communicate District and county results to the greater community ([March 2011](#))
- Begin training up to 90% of all District secondary staff to be Gatekeepers using Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) ([completed February 2011](#))
- Maintain and communicate the comprehensive crisis protocol ([completed Fall 2010](#))
- Continue to fund up to \$10,000 and enhance counseling opportunities through existing three to six session providers ([in progress](#))

**Q: How will you measure success specifically?**

A: The District will continue to analyze the California Healthy Kids (<http://chks.wested.org/reports>), Palo Alto Reality Check, and the Developmental Assets Survey reports to help inform and measure our efforts on the focused goal of student connectedness. Individual school sites will analyze site surveys that are completed every two years. Developmental Assets survey reports (<http://pausd.org/parents/programs/StudentConnectedness/index.shtml>) are posted on the District website. The Developmental Assets Survey results show that while the young people in this community have effective organizations dedicated to their well being and growth, as well as strong support from parents and other caregivers there is still work to do. Our collective community challenge is to strengthen our efforts toward increasing the assets of our young people, thus giving them the skills and talents they will need as adults.

**Q: Why go through all the programs we already know about that we do know aren't enough?**

A: It's difficult to know which parents know about which programs. If you don't have a child in middle school, we wouldn't expect you to know about the programs at that level. That was the impetus to give an overview of programs in place. We collaborated and shared the presentation material with the program organizers prior to the event. They voiced their support for the material. The presentation included an overview of all programs to be certain all attendees understood what work is currently occurring in the District. If you are interested in a particular school programs, we encourage you to talk to the site principle as programs are growing and evolving all the time.

The District will continue to collaborate with PSN, the City Council, parents, Parent Teacher Association Council (PTAC), and experts in the community to build on the ongoing efforts at the sites, District, and City. This focused goal is a multi-year effort.

**Questions on Connectedness**

**Q: JLS has the "Connections" program**

**a. Who does it serve?**

**b. How successful is it?**

**c. Why doesn't a similar program exist at the other middle schools and the high schools?**

A: Below is the link to JLS's Connections Program. It is the middle school extension of the choice program at Ohlone but is open to all students in the district. The following website gives a thorough description of the program.  
(<http://jls.pausd.org/default/index.cfm/departments/connections/?keywords=connections>)

Currently, JLS has two sections in the sixth grade with approximately 50 students; there are two sections in the seventh and eighth grades as well. It is a "Choice Program." Jordan has the extension of the Spanish Immersion choice program.. Terman has the extension of the Hoover choice program of Direct Instruction. Students may opt/apply for the Connections Program at JLS. Though Terman and Jordan do not have the Connections program, they do have Core Teachers and Team Teachers, as does the "regular" JLS program. When students share the same core teachers, research supports that this fosters a small learning community and promotes student connectedness to their teachers and adults on campus.

**Q: *I've been impressed with the Connections program at JLS. Any thoughts on expanding that program into the other middle schools in the District?***

A: (See response to previous question). Yes, however, the focus to date has been to strengthen the program at JLS. One of the Connections challenges in past years has been that students do not wish to continue in seventh and eighth grades. Staff believes some structural changes may address this concern. These expansion conversations are at the beginning phase. It would also depend on the level of interest of parents at the other two sites. There would have to be enough students to fill a full class to support staff at both those sites.

**Q: *The Team program at Paly seems to be an enormous step toward connectedness. Why not expand it to all or most freshman?***

A: Link to TEAM Paly. [http://www.paly.net/~team/about\\_team.html](http://www.paly.net/~team/about_team.html)

One quarter of freshmen students are enrolled in TEAM Paly, and no student is denied access to TEAM Paly. Families need to opt to enter their students in the lottery for a chance to become a TEAM student. Additionally, not all parents/students would prefer to have the TEAM approach. Some students prefer to have a bigger group of classmates that they can interact with in classes.

**Q: *How many students do these programs involve-Camp Everytown, Small Learning Communities (SLC) at high schools?***

**Q: *What percent of HS students in Palo Alto attends Camp Everytown? Is there a risk that this experience leaves students open and raw with no good outlet to help them reintegrate into the rat race?***

A: Gunn: In 2009-2010, 120 students signed up for Camp Everytown. Camp Everytown is an intensive four-day residential retreat for high school youth that reduces stereotypes, bias, and prejudice, and increases understanding and respect for differences in race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and other factors that divide us. Camp Everytown is based on respect, acceptance, and responsibility—core values that promote non-violence in our local communities. In 2010-2011, 70 students signed up. The event is organized and supported by veteran Everytown staff, teachers, and administrators.

A: Students must sign up if they wish to participate. During Camp Everytown, should a student share or demonstrate emotional/social health concerns, teachers and administrators are checking in with the students and following up with their parents and counselors to monitor the student upon return to school. Additional referrals are made upon need of support services for the student.

This is the pilot year for Gunn's SLC ninth grade class with approximately 28 students.

TEAM Paly has served about one quarter of the freshmen class since 1994.

**Q: *Girls Middle School has a connectedness program where a teacher and group (6-10 students) meet regularly throughout the year to discuss stresses and concerns in school life. Can this be done at Gunn?***

A: As you've described the model at Girls Middle School, Gunn does not have a similar model. However, students have access to adults on campus (i.e. guidance counselors) and many develop relationships with teachers. The issues are funding, time, teacher contracts, etc. Paly does have a Teacher Advisory program where each student is assigned a TA who they can meet with each week.

ACS counselors, administrators, and available staff meet with students to discuss such school topic concerns. Gunn staff is reviewing how best to incorporate a similar program called Sources of Strength at the site.

**Q: *Why are things so different among schools: e.g., Tiger Camp, Panther Camp. Where is Jordan's?***

A: Every school strives to meet its student's needs while taking into account the difference in student, parent and teacher populations. Though Jordan may not have an orientation "camp," the Jordan students are welcomed in the following ways:

About two weeks into the school year, Jordan has a half-day Teambuilding event for all sixth grade students. They host a range of about eight to ten different teambuilding activities, often with two stations each and mix the students into heterogeneous groups (not their normal class groupings) that rotate through the activities. Prior to the start of school, sixth grade students attend an ice cream social where they meet their teacher and take a tour of the school. Again, the eighth grade Leadership students lead the mixed groups of sixth grade students to the stations that the sixth grade teachers manage. By having the Teambuilding Day two weeks after school has started, Jordan has found their students are generally more settled and ready to make new friends. Parent volunteers also support this event, and the students end their morning with a group event.

- Around the third week of school, Jordan hosts a sixth grade social after school on a Friday, in which all of our sixth grade students are invited to play miniature golf and play in an arcade about fifteen minutes from campus. Jordan has a consistently strong turnout for this event, and it is a great opportunity for students to solidify their emerging friendships. Of course, they provide both staff and parent chaperones. The climate committee at Jordan is looking at other ways to make the transition easier for the sixth grade students including color coded name tags for all students at the school to be worn for the first few weeks of school. This will make it easier for students and staff to get to know each other at the beginning of the school year.

According to Jordan Principal Michael Milliken, "While I am aware that JLS and Terman both have slightly different orientation programs, I believe this system works very well for our students, places them thoughtfully in heterogeneous groups with teachers they will likely connect with, and orients

our students to Jordan in a caring manner that gives them ample opportunity to 'learn the ropes' and make new friends."

**Q: Clubs have existed for a long time. We have concern for students who do not want a club. What will be for them?**

A: We have to respect that every student is going to want to join a club. With over 90 clubs on both high school campuses, there are many opportunities for students to get involved in the school community. It begins with identifying the student's interest. Some students engage in the visual performing arts, the media center, journalism, academic extra curricular activities, athletics, youth community service, or intramural sports (beginning in March 2011). Clubs are initiated by students. The only requirement is that they find a staff member willing to take on the advisory role. It is also important for parents to let school administrators or counselors know if their student is not involved to the extent that the parent/guardian would like. Earlier this year, secondary principals sent an email message asking parents to contact the school if their child needed help connecting. When these issues are brought forward by caring adults, the student's experience in school is invariably improved.

**Q: Regarding the various programs at the school level:**

**a. Are all kids aware of these programs?**

**b. Are kids given an opportunity to give feedback on the effectiveness of these programs?**

A: Each school site contributes a large amount of time and effort in publicizing various programs which are often student led. For example, at Paly 60 clubs participating in Club Day. "Club Day is the time in the year that all of Paly's clubs can showcase what they have to offer to the student body," ASB president Chirag Krishna said. "So not only does it give our clubs a chance to market themselves, but it also gets our students more involved in the Paly community by including them in the many different clubs on campus." Both the *Paly Voice* and the *Gunn Oracle* highlight various programs throughout the school year.

**Q: What changes can parents make at home to support connectedness at school?**

A: Below are two website resources from Project Cornerstone and Search Institute on efforts to help parents learn the simple, everyday steps to raising successful kids.

<http://www.projectcornerstone.org/html/parents/resources.htm#Newsletters>

<http://www.search-institute.org/families>

Perhaps the two most important things you can do are: (1) Have dinner or some other meal with your student and talk about what is going on at school. This is a great chance for you to listen and learn. (2) Become involved in some capacity with the activities in which your child is participating. While they may say they do not want you around, they need your attention, interest, and understanding more than ever when they are in secondary school. Parents/guardians are their children's most important role model, and when they are involved and positive about what is going on at school, their children generally are as well.

### **Questions on School Climate**

**Q: Challenge Success is one of the most innovative programs to address the underlying culture in high achieving communities and is based right here at Stanford. Why hasn't the District embraced this program?**

A: Challenge Success has been integrated in some of our secondary schools. JLS is a Challenge Success school. The administration and staff at JLS have been working hand in hand with Denise Clark Pope on various professional development efforts around "meaningful homework".

Jordan's Climate Committee has been working with the Challenge Success program in looking at how parents and kids define success. Denise Clark Pope spoke with the entire faculty in December. Jordan had a parent education meeting with her in January that was attended by about 100 parents (advertised to all three middle schools, but anyone was welcome to attend). The kids were all given a survey on what values were important to them and asked to assign values to them up to 100 points. They were also asked to relate what they thought was important to their community and to their parents. Surveys were sent home with students for parents to complete. The eighth graders had a follow up assembly with a Challenge Success staff member to look at their results and their parents and how they can make changes in their lives. These are all available on the Jordan website ([jordan.pausd.org](http://jordan.pausd.org)). Additionally, Jordan has implemented other activities related to social emotional learning.

Gunn High School has also been involved with Challenge Success. Gunn team of students, staff and parents attended a Challenge Success conference/workshop at Stanford University on September 25 and 26, 2009. This is a continuation of our work with Stanford's SOS program. (Gunn was among the first schools to be linked with Stanford in efforts to reduce student stress levels).

Though some of our schools have not officially identified themselves as a Challenge Success School, it does not mean that sites are not working on those same issues. It takes time to get everyone, students, faculty and parents, to buy into a particular program or model. To insist that a school adopt a model does not mean that it will be successful. It takes time for everyone to understand the purpose of a program and to decide if it will work within their environment.

**Q: High school counselors talk to incoming freshmen. What is the message you want your counselors to give new students about making high school a truly meaningful, healthy experience?**

A: As guidance counselors and administrators visit the middle schools in preparation for enrollment and transition to the high schools, guidance counselors are always emphasizing the importance of a well balanced student by providing counseling services from academic planning, to college requirements, and to the social and emotional health of students. Resources are often shared with both parents and students. And a key message to parents/guardians and students is to be involved in school life. It really is a partnership.

**Q: Question on high expectation in reference to Amy's presentation.**

A: This comment was made under the discussion of Developmental Assets. Asset #16 is High Expectations, best defined when parents and teachers reinforces and supports the child to do

her/his best at school and in other activities. Research and experts will concur that students want adults to set boundaries and expectations for them.

### **Questions on Mental Health Support for Students**

**Q: Shouldn't we hire seasoned professionals-licensed MFTs or LCSWs for our schools?**

**Q: Is ACS doing an adequate job? Are interns sufficiently trained to deal with suicidal teens?**

A: Schools are staffed with credentialed guidance counselors, school psychologist, and behaviorist. In addition, a licensed MFT or LCSW supervises the ACS counselors. The ACS counselors are well trained by the On Campus Counseling (OCC) Director. The range of issues addressed through the OCC Program includes:

- Academic stress
- Parent/child communication
- Peer conflict
- Self-esteem
- Depression and anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts
- Grief and loss
- Substance abuse

It is also important to note the District psychologists, counselors, and administrators also refer students to additional 3-9 session referrals for additional outside school counseling free of charge to the family or staff of the District. In the 2009-2010 there were approximately 35 referrals (K-12). This is one of the many items on the District MOU with PSN.

**Q: Is there a planned budget increase for 2012 for in house psychiatric staff at Gunn and Paly?**

A: The District is currently assessing the needs and additional staffing allocation for the 2011-2012 school year. This staffing discussion is taking place in an intensely uncertain fiscal climate with the District facing a structural deficit for 2012-2013 of at least \$4 million.

### **Questions on Training**

**Q: How can schools improve identifying suicidal youth?**

A: For the 2010-2011 school year, the District signed an MOU with PSN (a committee with 27 community partners to strive for youth well being) which included training all middle and high school staff on Gatekeeper (QPR) as a form of suicide prevention and vigilance on ways to identify a suicidal youth. As of March Gunn, Paly, JLS, Terman and Jordan staff have been trained with QPR. All School Counselors and psychologists completed QPR training in Spring 2010.

**Q: How is the District educating students about their own social-emotional behavioral development and growth so they know when to break the so-called "code of silence"?**

A: The District is collaborating with PSN and the Gatekeeper sub-committee to identify a gatekeeper training program that is appropriate and effective for the teen audience. The intent is to have high school students receive this training in the fall of 2011.

Prior to the start of the summer, Living Skills teachers participated in professional development to further revamp many aspects of the course and tried to build greater consistency in terms of delivery. Social/emotional and mental health issues were part of that curricular work.

Anecdotal comments from counselors suggest that this code of silence is eroding. While this often means more work for counselors, it is an unquestionably good, and our community needs to collectively redouble its efforts in this regard.

Parents who are interested in an online version of the QPR training should contact Terry Godfrey or visit the PTAC website. (<http://paloaltopta.org>)

**Q: Can we expand the “peer helper” program in the high schools in a substantial way?**

A: Both high schools are exploring the implementation of Sources of Strength (SOS). SOS is a comprehensive wellness program that works to use peer leaders to change norms around codes of silence and help seeking. The program is designed to increase help seeking behaviors and connections between peers and caring adults. SOS has a true preventative aim in building multiple sources of support around individuals so that when times get hard, they have strengths to rely on.

### **Questions for Superintendent**

**Q: While respecting each school’s autonomy, how will you ensure enough is being done at each site? A little here and there will not be enough.**

A: Our schools have robust parent involvement, particularly through the PTA and the School Site Councils. Each school has a school climate committee dedicated to this topic. The District encourages those who believe there is not enough being done at a school to speak to the principal and/or members of the PTA or School Site Council. District staff is also happy to meet with parents who have specific concerns.

**Q: When will the plan for next year be done and presented?**

A: The Board has discussed the activities taking place this year and will consider District goals for the following year at its June meetings.

**Q: It is fine to give principals some autonomy in getting things done, but why is Dr. Skelly afraid to lead on the issue? He is the Superintendent. What does he have against the focused goal?**

A: Dr. Skelly is not against this goal. Our enduring work is to create a personalized education that meets the needs of every student. Creating an environment where students are connected is an indispensable part of this work.

**Q: *Where are the teachers tonight?***

A: The meeting took place on Sunday night. While teachers were welcome to attend, they were not requested to attend the meeting. The meeting was for parents.

**Q: *Why did it take so long to make the social-emotional need a top goal?***

A: The social-emotional welfare of students has been at the forefront of the District's work for as long as staff can remember.

**Q: *There's much talk of the benefits of the Paly bell schedule. What's stopping its implementation at Gunn?***

A: Gunn has many of the same elements in its schedule that Paly has. That said, conversations are taking place about bell schedules. What works at one school may not work at another. The majority of student, faculty and parent expectations may not be the same.

**Q: *Why was this meeting not advertised in the Gunn Connection (email) newsletter?***

A: This event was not a school or District sponsored event.