Youth Forward

September 8, 2020

Dear Sacramento School Leaders,

We are a group of high school students, young adults, and youth advocates from various backgrounds in the Sacramento region who are working to support youth mental health on school campuses. We are writing to offer recommendations on how high schools in Sacramento County could take actions in the opening months of the school year to support youth health and wellbeing. We are living in a time of great stress and uncertainty. We believe that school leaders need to implement new practices and policies in response to this unprecedented situation.

We also believe strongly that young people need to be at the center of how schools respond. In addition to providing input and feedback, we also provide leadership to support one another and our younger peers and can help the school community navigate these difficult times. We are change agents and leaders in our community.

As we return to school this fall, we think the number one priority should be students' mental health. In order to help youth access academic content and reconnect with their classmates, we have to acknowledge and give students a space to talk about all of the things they have been going through during this pandemic, to the extent that they are able. As we know, the pandemic has been an incredibly hard time for everyone, and no one is coming out of this unaffected. There are students that have been dealing with economic and financial instability, racism, police brutality, sick family members, death, and isolation. We cannot assume we know what has happened in someone's life since school went online last spring. But what we do know is that everyone has had different traumas and stressors from the coronavirus and that this variability in experiences can influence how schools' function and provide support to students. Therefore, it is important to hold space for students and have open and honest conversations with them about the impact the pandemic has had on their lives and to affirm their feelings and emotions surrounding this moment we are living in. Without having these critical discussions and trying to tackle student's needs, they will not begin processing and healing from this pandemic and that will make it challenging for them to participate or thrive in school.

Our recommendations aim to address student needs and fall into four categories – communications, social-emotional supports, academic supports, and other supports. The suggestions are as follows:

Communications

1. **Improve communication between schools and students, including families:** Students, teachers, and parents need to know how school administrations are navigating the pandemic and what is being planned. The uncertainty causes a lot of stress and anxiety, so we ask that you keep students informed by providing more consistent and transparent communication about distance learning, class schedules,

safety measures, grades, school policies, etc. We suggest students, teachers, and families receive weekly contact from their school or the district with relevant information. Since not every household speaks English, we ask that this information be provided in several languages spoken in the Sacramento region; we highly encourage it to be through various forms of media i.e. email, text messages, videos, and/or social media. Lastly, it is important that the youth and their caregivers be included in decisions that affect them via community listening sessions. For students that are rarely reached by the school, you can try to utilize those students' friends to bring them up to speed on disseminated information or opportunities to engage. Students can help spread updates from the school.

Social-Emotional Support

1. **Prioritize the mental wellness of students by ensuring each student has a positive relationship with a staff and a peer mentor:** Relationships are key to supporting student mental well-being. We ask that teachers, coaches, and school staff prioritize 1-1 outreach to students to build and maintain relationships with students. Each school could set the goal of connecting with every student at the beginning of the school year through a virtual home visit (a phone call, Facetime or Zoom).
   o In addition, the school could form teams of students or work with existing school groups/clubs who would reach out to their peers or to younger students to send the message that they matter.
   o Schools could hire mental health clinicians as in the new initiative led by SCOE.

2. **Emphasize and foster the meeting and making of new friends:** COVID-19 is making it hard for students to make new friends and be with their existing friends. Friendship is vital to our mental well-being. Just as we are organizing distance learning for academics, we need to find new ways to help students connect with one another and make friends. For instance, students could meet new people in virtual book clubs, movie clubs, game nights, lunch hangouts, study groups, buddy programs, and in Facebook groups or communities. Connecting through technology is safer than meeting in person but we know that some students will opt to meet in person, so we advise that you provide students with a guide on in-person activities that are low-risk.

3. **Offer enrichment classes and alternative curriculum:** For many of us, we get the most support and enjoyment from enrichment classes (such as art, music, dance, cooking, computer programming, etc.) that bring out our creativity and other gifts often unrecognized in academic classes. Students also crave learning about things like social justice, ethnic studies, financial literacy, and doing independent study. Teachers and school staff could help organize these classes, and schools could encourage students to self-organize as well. Schools could look to community organizations that provide these types of enrichment activities to young people and see about them donating their time to offer guidance or introduction classes/lessons

for interested students. Having an engaging and welcoming environment to tap into outside of an academic setting is important for student's mental wellbeing and continued success.

Academic Support

1. **Improve access to teachers and provide more educational support:** Students that need extra attention or support would particularly benefit from virtual office hours coordinated with their teacher. Schools should also consider inviting students who lack the technology necessary for distance learning and/or who need additional help to come to the school for in-person tutoring and academic help. We have empty school buildings and outdoor areas. Let us consider how we can help students and still protect the health of school staff and school families.

2. **Provide college and career readiness support:** Many students, especially juniors and seniors, are worried about not being prepared for college. Distance learning has negatively impacted some of their grades and they are concerned they will not be able to get into college as a result. They are wondering if they still need to take the standardized tests of SAT/ACT. Making sure students have the skills and knowledge for higher education as well as assisting them while navigating the application process is necessary. Supporting the students that are about to begin college is also important as many of them are anxious about learning online and having to teach themselves. We recommend conducting several college preparatory and career exploration workshops throughout the year, bringing in guest speakers and admissions counselors from local community colleges and universities to speak to students about their educational options and different career paths. We also recommend that you connect students to volunteer opportunities in their community. They want hands-on experience and desire giving back which is integral to them figuring out their interests. Basically, students want to be ready to succeed in college and the workforce and we must help them reach their potential and achieve their goals.

3. **Offer more breaks with distance learning and encourage flexibility with deadlines for assignments:** Students are struggling to keep up with school for a variety of reasons and they need more understanding when it comes to scheduling their education and meeting expectations. To alleviate some of the pressure from school and accommodate the shift in adolescents' circadian sleep rhythms, we suggest starting school at 9 or 10 AM and offer more breaks in the school day. To do that, it might make sense to shorten school days and maybe only have four hours of class with four subjects a day. The remaining hours in a traditional school day could be used for doing homework, getting tutoring, extracurricular activities, or leisure. Students need adequate breaks from constantly being on their computers and screens. We also suggest having a few weekdays a month where students and teachers are completely off from school as this could mitigate exhaustion and burn out. Additionally, students reported receiving more homework and assignments

when COVID happened and being overwhelmed by the amount of schoolwork with less academic support. We recommend teachers being mindful of what is going on in students' lives and asking students when they would like things to be due. Let students provide input and encourage them to talk to teachers when they are having trouble with completing schoolwork on time. We know that providing structure for young people in school is important for their development but we also know that communicating with them about their needs, problem solving with them, and being flexible with meeting them where they are at is also important for their success.

Other Supports & Suggestions

1. **Ensure there is equity in school discipline practices by approaching with care and respect:** As we know, queer youth, youth of color, children with disabilities as well as those living at or near poverty have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools has also been extremely difficult on parents that rely on schools to be safe places for their children before, during, and after school, particularly for parents that work, including essential workers. Schools need to support and protect these vulnerable students and communities. There are many topics we could raise around equity, but we want to focus on discipline practices and how punishment is handled during COVID. Already students have been harshly disciplined in remote schooling. For example, a teenager went to juvenile detention for not doing her online schoolwork; a 3th grader in Sacramento was blocked from her school email account because she asked tech support too many questions; and students have been told they can't get up to grab water during virtual class. We ask that schools and teachers approach students in a caring and non-punitive way. We encourage school staff to hone on relationship building, trying to get to know and understand students and not making assumptions based on what they see on a virtual screen. Schools should know that they are guests in student's homes. They must be mindful and respectful of the fact that students and parents might be uncomfortable with the vulnerability that comes with educators and administrators seeing into their lives. Young people are the best people to include in finding solutions to problems that affect them so lastly, we urge you to include students in setting classroom rules and norms.

2. **Implement safety protocols:** If anyone goes to campus for in-person instruction or services, including to obtain distributed meals, we ask that virus mitigation procedures be followed. This includes masks, 6 feet or more physical distancing, hand washing, temperature checks, regular cleaning of rooms, and ventilation protocols. Where the 6-foot rule cannot be followed, people must be wearing a mask. Teachers and nonteaching staff might have to work in person and interact with students, so we request that they be protected, possibly in the form of hazard pay, masks, face shields, and Plexiglass barriers. Moreover, we ask that school leaders put protocols in place for how a school responds when a student or teacher tests positive for covid-19. This safety measure should be shared out and easily visible for the school community to read.

3. **Improve access to community organizations and resources**: There are numerous services that a school cannot offer, or does not have the resources to provide, but there are organizations in the community that can help outsource these needs. Most students do not know where to go or who to contact when they need help with sex/health education, domestic/familial abuse, food resources, homelessness, or mental health supports. These services are critical to provide to our students, not only for their immediate physical safety, but for their peace of mind and academic success. We suggest providing and promoting a list of community resources and instructions for accessing those resources. We also recommend placing this information on a central website and consistently doing outreach, so students know where to get assistance.

Students have many needs right now. To best support student health and wellbeing, we recommend that you improve communications from the ground up, cultivate opportunities for social connections, provide greater access to academic supports, be understanding and empathetic, and seek out youth input and leadership. Additionally, we want to recognize that this is a challenging time for educators, administrators, and other school staff. Providing virtual teaching and school services requires a lot more work than face-to-face instruction and support. This we know and we appreciate your dedication to us and our education. We hope that you are taking care of yourself and attending to your wellbeing first so that you can support that in others.

Furthermore, we would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you via a conference call to have a dialogue regarding these recommendations. Thank you so much for your openness to receiving our suggestions. To follow-up with us or schedule a meeting please contact our Youth Forward representatives Sarah-Michael Gaston at sarah@youth-forward.org and Jim Keddy at jim@youth-forward.org.

Sincerely,

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