



# Student Advisory Cabinet 2020-2021

## Policy Recommendations

### Overview

The most effective policy solutions reflect the strengths, opportunities and realities of the communities where it intends to be implemented. To that end, the office of LAUSD Board President Kelly Gonez established the Student Advisory Cabinet to discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning on the mental health of high school students. After extensive exploration of the topic, the Student Advisory Cabinet has crafted the following policy recommendations outlining the ways in which we collectively can improve upon our District's current and future, post-pandemic practices to ensure all students have equitable access to the support they need.

### The Cabinet

The Cabinet consisted of high school students between 10th and 12th grade who are reflective of the geographic and ethnic diversity of LAUSD students and included English Learners, Newcomers, Students with Disabilities, Foster Youth and Gifted and Talented Students. The Cabinet met monthly over the course of 5 months to explore and discuss their experience, and the experiences of their peers in distance learning.

### Our Recommendations in Context

Many of the challenges students experience around mental health existed prior to school closures, but were exacerbated by the pandemic. The cabinet ultimately focused on three topics which were of most interest:

- Supporting Student Mental Health and Wellness
- The Challenges of Remaining Engaged Virtually
- School Culture During and After the Pandemic

Within these three areas, the cabinet bifurcated their policy recommendations to address both the short-term and long-term impacts of the pandemic on students:

- Short-term solutions focus on actionable changes that could make an impact on student learning currently, as students finish their 2020-2021 school year and transition into the summer
- Long-term solutions are rooted in changes to existing policies that could be improved to meet the pre-existing needs of students before the pandemic and afterwards; these solutions take into consideration additional relief funds, resources, and opportunities for innovation

# SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

*“The mental health of students is something that’s now often talked about but rarely ever understood... Not being present within the school environment has taken a toll on many students, but having proper support may be a solution.”*

- Prince Nwalozie, Nathaniel Narbonne High School

The pandemic shed light on the many challenges students had in accessing mental health supports and resources. Prior to school closures, students shared they struggled to find adults on campus to speak to regularly regarding their mental health, or often found that access to mental health providers and services were limited due to funding constraints.

Once the pandemic began, students found it even more difficult to locate and utilize these providers and services in a virtual environment, when they needed it the most. As a result, students often found themselves navigating the loss of loved ones, financial hardships, housing instability, trauma, feelings of isolation and hopelessness without the help and guidance of a mental health professional.

In their discussions, students recognized the need for increased socio-emotional and mental health support as they return to in-person learning to address the previously existing challenges of mental health and wellness, in addition to the more immediate need to be responsive to the traumas of the global pandemic.

## Recommended Short-Term Solutions

- Provide teachers with professional development to help them identify and support students’ needs
- Provide learning environments that encourage students to feel safe speaking to teachers about their mental well-being and emotional health
- Provide additional mental health support staff to adequately address the needs and challenges of students throughout the pandemic
- Provide regularly scheduled, accessible, daily drop-in mental health counseling hours both in person and virtually
- Provide consistent, regular student-led parent-teacher conferences/check-ins
- Create a simple online platform where students can schedule virtual and telephone appointments with counselors and support staff
- Regularly circulate mental health resources via student or school webpages

## Recommended Long-Term Solutions

- Promote stronger student-teacher relationships, as they are often the first people students speak to regarding mental health
- Provide an initial wellness check or needs-assessment for students returning to school in order identify their needs, and connect them to the appropriate services
- Outsource or contract with community-based mental health providers to offer individual counseling sessions for students/families

- Designate mental health counselors per grade level and allow them to “matriculate” with their cohort of students to provide continuity of support

Recommended Long-Term Solutions (continued)

- Recruit and retain more PSWs, social workers, and counselors to lower turnover rates and provide consistent support staff at schools
- Create simple and accessible direct access to mental health resources online. Circulate these resources regularly throughout the school year via social media and parent-outreach efforts
- Create group spaces outside of classrooms for students to find support with counselors and peers
- Continue leveraging Advisory as a mental health space in which students regularly check in with their teachers and connect with one another. Use Advisory as a space to build wellness where topics like mindfulness, discussion of current events, and self-reflection are encouraged
- Integrate mental health into school culture and set aside days or weeks with school-wide awareness campaigns and activities related to mental health
- Provide support for parents via workshops or support groups led by counseling professionals at Parent Centers. Provide parents with workshops that build off mental health supports in school and help them identify and effectively support their children at home
- Provide teachers with socio-emotional support prior to the first day of school to ensure they are able to feel confident in their response to welcome students back to regular in-person instruction
- Continue programs that are essential to low-income families, such as the Grab n’ Go Centers (food distribution)

*When asked how they would rate the emotional health of their classmates since distance learning began,*



*84.2% of students indicated that they felt their peers “seem to be struggling a lot.”*

*When asked how students would rate their own emotional health since distance learning began,*



*82.3% of students responded they were “struggling a lot emotionally.”*

# THE CHALLENGES OF REMAINING ENGAGED VIRTUALLY

*“Although it seems counterintuitive, communication is difficult during virtual learning. With a bunch of platforms to communicate, it has actually caused a lack of uniformity and increased stress on students.”*

– Lalitha Dhyaram, North Hollywood Senior High Highly Gifted Magnet

Students resoundingly expressed stress and fatigue from distance learning and Zoom. Efforts to create interactive and engaging lessons via Zoom are inconsistent from class to class, and most students attribute their struggle with motivation due to the inherent nature of distance learning. Students shared that they often lacked motivation and regularly felt overwhelmed, even in subjects they enjoy, and experienced subsequent declines in their academic performance and grades.

Transitioning to more asynchronous (independent) work resulted in a dramatic increase of assignments meant to ensure mastery of content outside of the time spent with teachers in synchronous instruction. To ensure students were engaged in distance learning and the content, teachers often relied on the completion of assignments to monitor students as opposed to other methods of measuring student engagement (socratic method, discussion frameworks, check-ins, attendance, participation etc.).

## Recommended Short-Term Solutions

- Provide students with more autonomy in their learning, such as creating opportunity for student choice in class schedule, subjects and electives, and allowing students to lead class discussions
- Provide students with multiple opportunities and a variety of choices to demonstrate mastery of content standards, such as student-elected projects, the demonstration of skill using culturally-relevant materials, as well as creative freedom in format
- Provide more office hours with teachers, advisors, psychiatric social workers (PSWs), and counselors that allow for students to explore and discuss their feelings and challenges as they pertain to academics
- Create an online platform where students can schedule virtual and telephone appointments with counselors and teachers for academic support
- Include regular time management lessons in Advisory classes to help students find a balance between work and rest

## Recommended Long-Term Solutions

- Create student-led study groups that meet after school or in Advisory to allow students to leverage each other as motivation and support in completing coursework
- Continue providing multiple options for students to display mastery of skills and/or content.
- Develop curriculum options that are reflective of student interests (culturally relevant pedagogy) to ensure they interact with class content meaningfully.
- Develop lessons and coursework that is student-centered, interactive, and engaging
- Provide a variety of options for students to display mastery of a skill or content. Such as presentations, creative writing prompts, art-based projects, etc

- Allow students to demonstrate understanding using non-standard means other than summative assessments such as portfolios, projects, and other forms that are spread throughout the duration of the quarter/semester
- Provide students with multiple opportunities and a variety of choices to demonstrate mastery in a skill or content as a general practice in classes.

# BUILDING & MAINTAINING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY DURING & AFTER THE PANDEMIC

*“Social-emotional and mental health on campus is important because schools should work as communities to help individuals feel safe in their school environment... School activities and social sessions with other students are important to build that community!”*

- Nadira Ahmed, Dr. Richard A. Vladovic Harbor Teacher Preparation Academy

Many students lamented the loss of their relationships to friends, teachers, and the school community as a result of the transition to Distance Learning. In-person activities that once brought students together, focused on student interests, or provided spaces for student-led initiatives were deeply missed. Intrapersonal relationships with teachers and peers, which were usually cultivated in these spaces and provided students with a much-needed sense of community and connection, suffered.

When asked to rate how connected they felt to their peers, 63.2% members rated their relationships to peers with a 2 or below (on a scale of 1 to 5), indicating a lack of connection to their peers. Recognizing how essential a sense of connection is for mental health and well-being, students developed the following recommendations to strengthen relationships with one another in the remaining weeks of the 2020-2021 SY and beyond.

## Recommended Short-Term Solutions

- Allow clubs and/or extracurricular activities to occur and meet safely outdoors
- Allow outdoor sports and competitions and encourage students to attend
- Creating informal virtual spaces for students to build relationships with each other and their teachers outside of academic subjects
- Provide virtual and in-person graduation ceremonies that allow for social distancing

## Recommended Long-Term Solutions

- Empower the general student population to participate in activities, student governance councils and extra curricular events by expanding outreach beyond high-achieving students or using academic merit
- Make the process easier and more accessible for students to create clubs and start up new extracurriculars at their school
- Dedicate funds to student body purposes, distributed equitably. Right now the funds are held by the principal-students often contribute to the student body fund through their oncampus purchases. Allow student decision making in the budget process as it pertains to student body fund expenditures, such as deciding which events and activities to fund for the student body
- Organize school wide events that celebrates different types of celebratory events (Cultural heritage Months, and more) to increase student spirit, celebrate diversity, promote inclusion and embrace their individuality
- Create more school spirit week activities and encourage students to take leadership roles in planning and execution of these events
- Create more school clubs, especially those that help with mental health. Encourage having at least one club with socio-emotional focus for every school

- Allow students to develop and manage a successful social media page for the school, where all updates, resources, and information regarding school events can easily be accessed

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