



Press Release

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Whittier Union Launches Student Well-Being Program Program Expands Wellness Centers, Social-Emotional Support for Students

WHITTIER, CA – The Whittier Union High School District is expanding its award-winning mental health program at Santa Fe High School to all schools District-wide, with the expansion of wellness centers, counseling services and overall support for students who are experiencing barriers to their personal and academic achievement.

Following the success of Santa Fe’s Serenity Program, which won a Golden Bell Award in 2013, the District is launching a Student Well-Being Program under its Mental Health Initiative, which involves 16 master- and bachelor-level social work interns who are providing on-campus counseling and case management, expanded partnerships with community agencies, the implementation of an online referral system and staff training on threat assessment.

Through a widely inclusive process, the District identified wellness services as a priority under its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), a blueprint that outlines how the District will target services for its greatest student needs.

“So far this school year, 215 students have been referred for mental health services, showcasing the need for social-emotional support programs on our campuses,” said Director of Student Support Services Amy Larson. “This is a very new and ambitious program that is providing us the tools to better assist our students with prevention, early intervention and support when they need it.”

The program is modeled after Santa Fe’s Serenity Program, which was established in 2006 and includes individual and group counseling, case management, classroom presentations and parent education sessions, as well as partnerships with local universities such as Whittier College, USC and Azusa Pacific University, among others.

Under the leadership of counselor and licensed clinical social worker Angela Castellanos, the Serenity Program was recognized with the prestigious Golden Bell Award for increasing student attendance rates and test scores and decreasing discipline cases. Castellanos is now leading Whittier Union’s efforts to expand similar mental health services across District schools as the new Student Well-Being Liaison.

“We want our students not only to have the ability to succeed academically, but also have the tools and resources that permit them to flourish in their behavioral, psychological and emotional lives,” Castellanos said. “Through the success we have seen with the model program at Santa Fe High, I am confident that we will experience the same results District-wide.”

Joining Castellanos in moving the program forward is Larson, a license clinical social worker with a

background in mental health, and District Mental Health and Community Services Liaison Jack Ketchem, a licensed marriage and family therapist with a credential in counseling.

As part of the program, Whittier Union has instituted wellness centers at its five comprehensive high schools, and counseling services are offered to students in the District's alternative education programs at Frontier and Sierra Vista high schools. La Serna and Pioneer high schools are currently working with their art departments to create murals for their centers and are in the process of creating a student well-being club called "LETS," short for "Let's Erase The Stigma."

In an effort to strengthen the program, the District has partnered with several local community agencies, including Los Angeles Centers for Alcohol and Drug Abuse, which provides drug and alcohol counseling services at all schools; Pacific Clinics, which provides behavioral services at Santa Fe and Pioneer high schools; and The Whole Child, which operates an integrated school health center, dubbed "The Gallery," on the Whittier High School campus.

Administrators, counselors and staff at each school site have undergone extensive training in suicide and threat assessment, led by school psychologist Stephanie Murray, an integral member of the District's Crisis Response Team and suicide prevention education. Teachers also received training on how to refer students to services available through the program. Crisis response training is scheduled in the spring.

In collaboration with each school's counseling staff, interns are coordinating mental health-related presentations for parents and students, with a suicide prevention training being offered to La Serna High School parents this month. California and Santa Fe high school parents received similar training last year.

Additionally, Whittier Union has partnered with APU for grant proposal writing and received a \$10,000 grant from Kaiser Permanente to administer the WhyTry program, which has enabled teachers and staff from the District's intervention programs to undergo training on how to motivate at-risk students to achieve in school.

"We are strongly encouraged by the impact this much-needed program has already made on our students, whose emotional and mental well-being and health is foundational to their success in school," said Whittier Union High School District Superintendent Sandra Thorstenson. "This is another example of our genuine concern for our students' well-being and our ability to use LCAP funding to develop new and innovative programs to benefit our students who are most in need."

PHOTO CAPTION:

WELLBEING1: Student Well-Being Liaison Angela Castellanos leads a WhyTry training seminar for a group of master- and bachelor-level social work interns who are providing on-campus counseling and case management to students across the District.

WELLBEING2: School psychologist Stephanie Murray, an integral member of the District's Crisis Response Team, conducts suicide prevention training to social work interns.

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The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement.

Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.

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