

March 1, 2023

SCHOOL CLIMATE SUBCOMMITTEE

School Climate Subcommittee
Wednesday, March 1 at 6:00 p.m.
Broadcast from the Media Arts Studio
454 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02138

Called for the purpose of discussing and reviewing the 2022 Teen and Middle Grades Health Survey, and related school climate surveys.

Subcommittee Members Present: Caroline Hunter (Chair), David Weinstein, Rachel Weinstein

Other School Committee Members Present: Ayesha Wilson and Student Members Grace Clemente and Adelina Escamilla-Salomon.

Also Present: Jennifer Amigone, Director of Assessment & Accountability, Manual Fernandez, Chief Equity Officer, Kim Huffer, Director of SEL, Dr. Michelle Madera, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education, Jamie McCarthy, Coordinator, PE, Health & Wellness; From the Cambridge Public Health Department: Mary Kowalczyk, Manager, Substance Use Prevention Programs, Emma Tzoumis, Epidemiologist, Program Planning & Evaluation Specialist, Josefine Wendel, Senior Director, Population Health Initiatives

Chair Hunter began the meeting at 6:01 p.m. by welcoming the group and reading the call of the meeting. She shared the agreements of the meeting below:

Agreements

- Speak and listen from the heart (respect)
- Step up/step back (watch air time)
- Progressive Stacking approach to conversation
- Expect and accept non-closure (work in progress)
- Bike rack (list of things that are important but should be addressed another time)

Setting the tone and mindset for the upcoming discussion, **Chair Hunter** posed the following to the group: “I’m going to ask you to go back to your high school years and your teen self and think about the most stressful event(s) in your high school years. Think about how it affected you, what support you needed, and the support you had or did not have, and the impact of that stress and its resolution or lack of resolution had on you. Let’s use this sensitivity to focus on our work to provide the necessary supports for our students.” She asked the group if someone wanted to share their personal story, but all deferred. She then passed the floor to Dr. Michelle Madera, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education.

Dr. Madera welcomed the group and presenters. She shared a presentation on the [Teen & Middle School Grades Health Surveys](#). Dr. Madera highlighted that this important resulted from a wonderful collaboration between CPSD and the Cambridge Public Health Department. She asked that speakers and guests introduce themselves before presenting. Dr. Madera reminded the group of the vision and mission of the Cambridge Public Schools and its four high-level objectives. She highlighted that she and her fellow presenters would speak to Objective 3: Establish robust multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to support students’ academic, social and emotional, and behavioral needs. She then turned the presentation over to Jamie McCarthy, Coordinator of PE, Health & Wellness.

Ms. McCarthy spoke to the Teen/Middle Grades Health Survey. The survey has been administered for many years and is closely aligned with the CDC survey and captures nine components of well-being. Ms. McCarthy underscored the bright spots of the survey including a decrease in bullying; an increase in social supports and connectedness; an increase in physical activity; and an increase in after-school activities.

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She passed the floor to Kim Huffer, Director of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Based on the data, CPS and Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA) have identified four core areas of focus for the next two years with a targeted focus on Belonging and Mental Health. Ms. Huffer shared that students continue to navigate the impact of the pandemic resulting in increased anxiety/worry, depression, and suicidal ideation. She underscored that students with anxiety and depression are not in the mindset to learn and excel academically and educators should be aware of this. Ms. Huffer spoke to the slides highlighting social supports, belonging, and discrimination. She underscored that special education students are feeling the most connected and hope to explore avenues to build this increased connection with other student populations. She highlighted that Asian/Pacific Islander students are feeling least connected. Regarding discrimination, students who identified as genderqueer reported the highest percentage of impact. Regarding mental health, females struggle more often and mental health issues increase in 11th grade with a drop in 12th grade. This data point aligns with the national trend of 11th graders navigating testing, AP classes, and the need to determine the next steps beyond high school. Regarding anxiety, gender nonconforming students have a higher level, as well as girls and special education students. Students are experiencing an increased level of suicidal ideation which is similar to national data. Ms. Huffer noted that this is an area of risk and educators should pay attention to this increase. Ms. Huffer shared that 53 students noted that they have attempted suicide on their surveys. Ms. Huffer underscored that those students who identify themselves are immediately matched with adult support. In reference to the data, Ms. Huffer highlighted that CPS is undertaking 3 approaches:

- 1.) Building educator capacity through consistent, tiered professional development and training
- 2.) Multi-tiered approach with students with more intensive supports to individuals and small groups most in need.
- 3.) Community resources for CPS students and families

Ms. Huffer turned the floor over to Ms. McCarthy who highlighted additional action steps that would be undertaken in year one including moving the survey from every two years to annually, additional trainings and workshops for educators, and increased partnerships benefitting educators, students, and families. Ms. McCarthy shared these resources with the group via the slide deck. Ms. McCarthy invited others to provide additional information regarding the resources. Ms. Kowalczyk, Manager of Substance Use with the Cambridge Public Health Department, highlighted the supports available outside of CPSD. These included a 24-hour crisis line, urgent care at Cambridge Hospital, and mobile crisis services. Ms. McCarthy highlighted the closing slide which outlined recent news and articles surrounding mental health and wellness.

Following the presentation, **Chair Hunter** opened the floor to questions starting with School Committee members. **Vice-Chair Rachel** inquired about the three student groups (Asian/Pacific Islander, Genderqueer, and Special Education) that the survey indicates are most impacted by bullying and experiencing anxiety and negative experiences. She asked for additional details regarding student support for these groups and educating adults. She was curious about the utilization of Gaggle and asked if CPSD staff and partners, including clerks and family liaisons, are involved with Safe Schools. Mr. Manuel Fernandez, Chief Equity officer, responded that liaisons work with the Asian and LGBTQ student groups. There are weekly meetings with the Asian student group. They have given grants to groups that center on the needs of Asian and LGBTQ community members. In collaboration with CRLS Principal Smith, Mr. Fernandez's team will be joining a summit entitled "Equity Matters." This summit will be an opportunity for students to lead educators and lift up these concerns. Ms. McCarthy shared that elementary schools have Rainbow Clubs, which are inclusive of all students but lift LGBTQ students. Upper Schools have similar clubs. Regarding Safe Schools training, they are tracking all educators and staff who are participating and noted that it is a popular training and DESE cannot service all CPSD

schools. Mr. Fernandez's office is trying to fill in these gaps with additional trainings. Mr. Fernandez highlighted that a collaborative network was launched yesterday with the Workforce program of 22 men of color. Training extends through April. His team and Cambridge partners are committed to supporting young men of color in the City of Cambridge. Ms. Huffer responded to the use of Gaggle and shared that the soft launch happened in November and currently provides services to 2-4% of CPSD students. They receive referrals from school counselors. In February, families were provided a direct link to Gaggle and the number of student users has increased. As of mid-February, a third of the contract (students participating) has been filled. Her team has received positive feedback from families. She noted that there are very few missed appointments which she believes is highly positive and indicates an area of success.

Chair Hunter asked **Member Weinstein** if he had comments and questions. He thanked the presenters and asked the following:

- 1.) How are we identifying students who might be in crisis?
- 2.) What is our goal and how close are we to achieving it regarding Safe Schools training for staff and students?
- 3.) The increase in reports of discrimination is distressing. Do we have data regarding what kind of discrimination – religion, gender identity, etc.?

Dr. Madera responded that each school has an RTI. Regular meetings are scheduled to discuss and identify students who are struggling. In addition, students identify through their writings and connecting with adults and peers. Ms. Amigone shared that the survey does not detail the specifics of the discrimination regarding religion, gender identity, etc. Ms. Huffer shared that many student support systems are in place. CRLS has a specific protocol for staff to ensure student conversations lead to connecting students to the right support system. Mental Health First Aid training is just starting within the district with the Health and Wellness group. They are still in the process of working out a plan to ensure that as many people are trained as possible.

Chair Hunter solicited Member Wilson's comments and questions. **Member Wilson** asked how are we being supportive and sensitive to LGBTQ students, particularly nonbinary students, and how can we foster safe spaces so students can make mistakes should they misgender someone.

Ms. McCarthy acknowledged that "it's a work in progress." Safe Schools training addresses these types of situations and offers strategies to apologize and move forward. Health and Wellness includes a gender curriculum for grades 2 through 9. DESE will do additional training. **Member Wilson** also advocated for community participants.

Student Member Escamilla-Salomon inquired about the distribution and accessibility of the survey and how the implementation of Healing Centered Engagement is taking place. Ms. McCarthy shared that the survey was administered by paper pre-COVID and is now administered electronically. This year, Principal Smith ensured that the survey was administered during block 2 classes and saw an increase in CRLS participation of up to 1200 students. Upper Schools take the survey in Advisory or Health classes. The survey is available in multiple languages and non-English speaking students are provided with support. Mr. Fernandez provided background on Healing Centered Engagement and the trainings available to the district's social workers. Ms. Huffer underscored that she and Ms. McCarthy have discussed training teachers as well.

Student Member Clemente asked about the anonymous status of the survey and how educators ensure that students are getting the needed support, notably younger students who typically do not self-advocate. Ms. McCarthy noted that the anonymous survey gives the option of including a name. When this happens, a student is quickly matched with a mental health counselor. In addition, the Mental Health

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First Aid training given to teachers provides an overview of the signs that students may exhibit if they are struggling with their mental health.

Chair Hunter asked if the future surveys will include screen time, bullying harassment, drug use, and the range of drugs available to students. Ms. McCarthy shared that the survey currently does cover these topics and is outlined in the full Executive Summary.

Chair Hunter opened the floor to additional questions,

Daniel Michaud Weinstock, a CPSD caregiver, appreciated the work of the survey and shared the following comments and questions:

- 1.) How do you make sure that students get the information? Youth behavior is the failing of adults; we shouldn't burden students and should be mindful of the framing around this information.
- 2.) We should lift up and celebrate staff who are working with students outside of school. How are we supporting adults who are supporting our students?
- 3.) What is the School Committee's role in these efforts? How are we resourcing the district? We want to ensure that we are prioritizing preventative measures.

Ms. McCarthy shared that the School Committee must approve the executive summaries which are happening currently. Following the approval process, the reports are then available to the community. Many classes use the data, especially in Health and Wellness classes. The data is not presented formally to the students. Dr. Madera underscored that educators must be mindful of disseminating the data as it can be distressing. She underscored that the data is informing the district's work.

Jose Wendel, Senior Director, of Population Health Initiatives with the Cambridge Public Health Department, is working with Ms. McCarthy to create an infographic so that the information will be presented in a digestible format and can provide a foundation for additional conversations. **Chair Hunter** highlighted that these issues, including allocating district resources, are a priority for the School Committee. She looks forward to continuing the conversation with additional meetings this spring.

Chair Hunter solicited meeting participants for additional questions. When none were received, she shared her email address and encouraged feedback. She thanked presenters, caregivers, and partners for participating. Dr. Madera thanked collaborators as well.

Chair Hunter concluded the meeting at 7:38 p.m.