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The Local Organizing Committee at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto is been intensely working on youth health issues.

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## School officials explain 'connectedness' efforts

*Different programs reflect variations in district's 17 campuses, they say*

by Chris Kenrick  
Palo Alto Weekly Staff

The popular "[[jls.pausd.org](http://jls.pausd.org) Connections]" program at JLS Middle School may be expanded to Jordan and Terman middle schools, Palo Alto school officials said.

Discussions about spreading the project-based, team-oriented program are "at the beginning phase," and decisions to go forward would "depend on the level of interest of parents" at Jordan and Terman, officials said.

The disclosure came in an 8.5-page [[www.paloaltoonline.com](http://www.paloaltoonline.com) list of answers] to questions that were posed to school officials at a Feb. 13 community meeting at [[www.saint](http://www.saint) St. Mark's Episcopal Church]. Members of 11 local religious congregations and [[www.piapico.org](http://www.piapico.org) Peninsula Interfaith Action] organized the session to review progress on the district's efforts to boost "student connectedness" following a series of teen suicides.

At the end of the February meeting, officials pledged to write complete answers to the questions they had not had time to address that evening, and recently submitted those responses to the St. Mark's group.

The answers reflect many efforts to promote "connectedness" -- voted by the Board of Education as one of the district's top goals for 2010-11 -- in the district's 17 schools, with varying approaches at each campus.

For example, Jordan does not operate a sixth-grade orientation "camp" akin to the popular "Panther Camp" and "Tiger Camp" at JLS and Terman, preferring instead to welcome new students through other activities.

"While I am aware that JLS and Terman both have slightly different orientation programs, I believe this system works very well for our students," Jordan Principal Michael Milliken said.

Jordan's sixth-grade activities, which include a team-building event and an ice-cream social, place students "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," Milliken said.

Superintendent Kevin Skelly and Student Services Coordinator Amy Drolette said in the St. Mark's document that every campus has a "school climate committee" and addresses concerns in individual ways.

"Every school strives to meet its students' needs while taking into account the difference in student, parent and teacher population," they wrote.

Some campuses, including JLS, Jordan and Gunn High, have participated in the Stanford University-based [[www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org) Challenge Success] program that aims to broaden the definition of success beyond the purely academic.

Challenge Success co-founder Denise Clark Pope spoke with the Jordan faculty in December and worked with staff at JLS on the subject of "meaningful homework," the document said.

Gunn has sent teams of students, staff and parents to the annual Challenge Success conference at Stanford.

"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," Skelly and Drolette said.

"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."

Asked why Palo Alto High's school-within-a-school TEAM program is not expanded to most or all freshmen, for example, the district said that TEAM is currently available to all Paly families who want it. In years when TEAM is oversubscribed, admission is by lottery.

"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," the district said.

In answer to a question on why Gunn does not copy the model of the independent Girls's Middle School, where a teacher meets weekly with a group of six to 10 students to discuss stresses and school life, Skelly and Drolette cited "funding, time, teacher contracts, etc."

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

Skelly and Drolette urged parents to contact counselors or administrators if their child is not "involved (in school) to the extent that the parent/guardian would like," noting that secondary principals emailed parents earlier this year with that message.

"When these issues are brought forward by caring adults, the student's experience in school is invariably improved."

The administrators also urged parents to use family mealtimes as opportunities to engage kids in conversation and to "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."

The full text of the district's response to the questions from the Feb. 13 meeting is available [[www.paloaltoonline.com](http://www.paloaltoonline.com) here].