

The Local Organizing Committee at St. Mark's Episcopal Church and other faith congregations have been intensely working on youth health issues.



## Parents praise school vote on academic stress

*New directive to launch probe of homework practices, testing schedules*

by Chris Kenrick  
Palo Alto Weekly Staff

Parents who have lobbied the Palo Alto Unified School District about excessive academic stress said they were pleased with a Tuesday school board vote on the subject.

Among its 12 "[pausd.org focused goals]" for 2011-12, the Board of Education Tuesday pledged to implement practices to "reduce unnecessary academic stress and promote a more supportive school culture."

To pursue the goal, principals and others will be asked to "examine the purpose and volume" of homework and contribute ideas for a district policy on "sound practices."

School leaders also will gather data on the distribution of tests and project deadlines in an effort to create a system to minimize "test clumping."

Other aspects of the goal involve an array of programs to "promote connectedness for every student" and use of a youth-wellness framework known as the [www.search Developmental Assets] to support the social-emotional health of students.

"The content of these goals is quite remarkable, and I appreciate the progress," said parent Ken Dauber who, with his wife Michele, had [www.paloaltoonline.com called for "new leadership" for the school district] as recently as seven months ago. The Daubers last spring organized parents into a group, [www.wecandobetterpaloalto.org We Can Do Better Palo Alto], to press for changes.

Matthew McDermott, rector of [www.saint St. Mark's Episcopal Church] and JLS parent, volunteered the assistance of his congregation in the "slow and challenging work" of executing on the stress-reduction goal.

A group from St. Mark's and other religious congregations, formed after a devastating cluster of Palo Alto student suicides that began in 2009, had lobbied the district for 18 months to adopt programs promoting "student connectedness."

Superintendent Kevin Skelly said he will present a calendar within the next month that lists a system for reporting progress toward the goals.

Regarding any new homework policy, he said research could be wrapped up in the current academic year and results in terms of "impact it has on teachers, course outlines and expectations" would likely be seen next fall -- or possibly, in some cases, by spring of 2012.

"I hope members of the community see their handprint on the work we have for this year," Skelly said.

Parents and school board members had sought to make the ambitious goals as specific and measureable as possible.

Some remained critical of the district for not doing more to impose "best practices" across Palo Alto's 17 campuses, leaving individual schools to pursue the goals in different ways.

"Things like Panther Camp at JLS are not leveraged to Terman or Jordan," said Kathy Sharp, a Gunn parent and member of We Can Do Better Palo Alto.

"It leads to reinventing the wheel.

"That's not what parents are looking for. They want to understand what best practices are and roll them out across the district," she said.

Michael Milliken, former principal at Jordan Middle School and now the district's director of secondary education, said the district has a policy of site-based decision-making.

"A lot of this analysis and activity is already taking place at the site level," he said.

"Lack of centrally planned activities reflects our approach. It's our intent to message this area as a priority for our sites, build capacity and monitor and support progress...."

Skelly said principals share information on a regular basis.

"The thing that's often cited is Panther Camp at JLS, but there's also something very similar at Terman, and Jordan takes a look at that. I hope we've created a culture of collaboration and the sharing of best practices around our activities."

Other school district goals adopted Tuesday include improving the "consistency and quality of instructional practices;" presenting a plan "to have more students complete college preparatory coursework and more fully support those who do not;" obtaining an independent analysis of college counseling practices at Gunn and Paly; providing one-to-one "coaching and mentoring to administrators;" expanding professional development for teachers and planning for "fiscal uncertainty" and enrollment growth.

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