

CAPOUSD Board District Meeting 3/13
Mental Health Awareness Speech
Project Strength Over Silence

May 1st, 2009, a boy from San Clemente High School, a school in *this* district, shot himself in the head. In September of 2016, a boy from Ladera Ranch Middle School, a school in *this* district, killed himself. Last week, a thirteen year old boy from Don Juan, a school in *this* district, killed himself.

In October of 2018, just a few months ago, I was having thoughts of suicide after the surfacing of a childhood trauma. I went to the office of my high school, San Juan Hills, and told the man at the front desk that I thought that I was going to kill myself. He told me that there were no available counselors at that moment. None. I was given only one option: to go back to class and wait for a counselor to become available. At this point in time I was worried that I wouldn't even make it across the quad without passing out from the terrifying thoughts going through my brain. Being told that there was nothing that could be done to immediately relieve my suicidal ideation was probably one of the worst feelings in the world.

This isn't about kids not wanting to talk about their mental health. It's about us not being able to.

The recommendations for school counselors are 1 for every 250 students. Our schools have 1 for every *1300* students. We are not providing our students with what they, what *WE*, need.

More teenagers and young adults die from suicide every year than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, COMBINED. And 4 out of 5 teens who end their lives have *shown warning signs* in the past.

In 2016, nearly 45,000 Americans age 10 or older died by suicide. But this is not just a middle school and high school issue. Suicide is an issue in little kids, even though many do not want to believe this is true - 53 children under the age of 12 killed themselves in the US in 2016. Those are children in elementary school. That is 53 families that didn't get to see their children graduate fifth grade.

Clearly, mental health is an issue in our youth. And the youth is our future, *your* future. We need a solution *now*, and we have some ideas that we hope you will take into consideration.

The mental health crisis can be improved within a short amount of time if you let us help you. Project Strength Over Silence is a student-run organization, which I am a part of, at San Juan Hills High School. We have been working for two years to help decrease stigma surrounding mental health and suicide awareness. Last year, we developed a presentation that covers various mental illnesses: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide. Presenters spoke about signs, prevention methods, coping mechanisms, and protocols based on the extent of the situation. Each member shared personal stories about mental illnesses that they had dealt with. And we always emphasized that students need to reach out to a trusted adult; whether it is a parent, teacher, or professional. We also provide the audience with a multitude of FREE and ACCESSIBLE resources from school counselors to national hotlines.

We have presented at San Juan Hills High School, high schools in the Irvine district, private middle schools, and local community events. And we had many positive responses. Teachers and parents thought our presentation was very professional and informative. Students said they enjoyed listening to the presentation because they felt a personal connection with the stories we shared. They felt like they weren't alone. So why have we not presented at more public schools in the Capistrano Unified School District if our past presentations had such positive responses? Well, we had scheduled presentations at Ladera Middle School, BAMS, Vista Del Mar, and Marco Forster. Unfortunately, we were later told by the district that we were not allowed to present at the middle schools in our district because "they did not have enough resources to deal with the rising reports." Other adults feared that we would instill these ideas in these children. But these ideas are already in their heads, and we, as a society, are too afraid to recognize this. If we keep ignoring the issue, we will only get the same, recurring outcome - dead children.

Many adults do not want to believe that their young child could have a mental illness. It seems impossible right? No, it is very possible. And children are having a hard time connecting with adults when it comes to discussing this topic.

For the different age groups to gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives, the district should work with the students to develop a more inclusive curriculum by creating a student mental health board. Students would work with you, the heads of the district, in order to reform the mental health education. We could work as a team to help each other. Students could give their opinions on certain reforms. Adults could give professional advice on how certain situations should be dealt with. Hearing from both age groups would be the most beneficial because everyone would learn from both perspectives. Adults hearing young testimonies and experiences will help them engage a better understanding of current youth mindsets.

Suicide can be prevented through simple actions done through the schools as well. We propose a system in which every textbook will be stamped on the inside cover with the national suicide hotline number along with placing this on the backs of ID Cards. This will make kids and parents feel safer knowing that there is a free and accessible resource for all to use. Hotlines are such an underrated resource that many people are not made aware of. They can be used in times of crisis - professionals will talk to you if you are having suicidal thoughts. They can be used in times of stress - they will talk to you if just simply overwhelmed or anxious. And making these numbers known in the district could make a difference. Even if that difference is only in one life, isn't that one child worth saving?

Students also need to see that someone cares and that they are available resources at every school. So many of our classmates aren't even aware that we have counselors. But there is a simple solution to this problem - by requiring quarterly check ins for every student with a designated counselor. When students enter high school, we are introduced to an academic counselor, and we must see them twice a year, once at the beginning of the school year and once at the end. So why not do this for regular counselors as well? When students are about to go into sixth grade and ninth grade, they should be introduced to their designated counselor. And every year, students should be required to do quarterly check-ins. These quarterly check-ins give students the opportunity to reach out for help in a simple way.

We recognize that the district does not have unlimited funds to put towards hiring more counselors, and there are solutions even this issue. According to CNN, "the February audit states that the California Department of Health Care Services allowed local mental health departments to accumulate \$231 million in unspent funds." *Unspent funds*. As a district, we could fight for these funds to be spent and even request access to part of the funds in order to pay for more mental health resources in the community.

There are also non-profit organizations that center around mental health and offer free services to those who request it. The district is already working with the Wellness and Prevention Center, based in San Clemente, where they promote mental wellness as well. Specifically, San Clemente High School and San Juan Hills High School have been coordinating with Susan Parmelee, who is a donation-based, on-campus counselor with the Wellness and Prevention Center. However, the Wellness and Prevention Center is only a few counselors, and we clearly need more.

Better Help offers free online counselors as well. The district and schools should promote this resource, along with other online counselors, as a free and easily accessible way for students to receive help if in-person counselors are not an option.

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services, located in Santa Ana, offers suicide prevention training for adults and adolescents. The district could nominate a group of individuals interested in helping mental wellness to attend the training. Once their training is complete, these individuals could present at all the public middle and high schools for suicide prevention. This would be a cheap and easy way to create more resource options for mental health awareness in the community.

Another issue is that the mental health curriculum in our district has very little impact on the students. It needs to be reformed.

The online health class *barely* covers mental illness at all. We are aware that the online health class is purchased, so you have no control over the actual material covered in the curriculum. However, you do have power over class credit requirements. We suggest that for every student to get full credit for their online health class, they also must go to at least one mental health seminar. Every school could host two of these a year, and the presentations could include a variety of speakers that go over personal experiences, different types of mental illnesses, prevention methods, and coping mechanisms. This way, all the students who take health classes online are made aware that mental wellness is just as important as one's physical health.

And in the classroom, the mental health chapter feels like a checklist that needs to be complete. It isn't current, and students find it difficult to relate to because it is so impersonal. Kids need to hear real life stories. Statistics and definitions can only go so far.

A teenager who hears "*you may have depression if you are easily irritable*" may not react to such a general statement. I mean, let's be real, we are all irritable. But a teenager who hears "*I first started losing interest in activities. Then, I stopped going out with friends. And from there, it spiraled into me not even wanting to be alive*" will react differently. We need to go through the textbook curriculum and ensure that these lessons are relatable. Students need to be able to make a personal connection so that they will be more inclined to find help sooner.

We need presentations from people who have lived through mental illness and/or suicide attempts. Every year, the district should find a keynote speaker, and this speaker should go to every middle and high school to share their story. All students and teachers should be required to attend these presentations, and it will be easily accessible since it could be during school hours. *This presentation could take one hour out of one day from the school year. That's it.* A simple presentation could make a huge impact by inspiring students to talk about their mental health.

With personal stories from teenagers, they can feel connected to peers and less ashamed of needing help. With personal stories from adults, they can see that there is hope and a future waiting for them. These speakers need to be diverse, varying in age, profession, gender, race, and sexuality.

We need to show students that it is *OKAY* to need help, that it is *OKAY* to have a mental illness. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Mental health is so important to talk about, and it is nothing to hide.

Mental health is nothing to hide. I used to feel ashamed about my story, but now I realize that my experience made me who I am today.

It began in eighth grade and continued into freshman year - a new school, new people, new classes. It was a lot to take in at first, but I was excited for the change. Maybe a new start? Maybe my previous issues will go away? I made myself seem like the tough freshman who had it all together. I seemed confident in my academic, athletic, and social abilities. I seemed confident in myself.

Unfortunately, this was not the real me. That was all just an act. As soon as I got home, behind closed doors, I became a different person. I was constantly stressed again... I would get pounding headaches, wouldn't eat for weeks, and would have nervous breakdowns.

I hated myself. Every time I looked in the mirror, I was disgusted with what the reflection showed. I began to self-harm because it was a way for me to gain some sort of control. I contemplated ending my own life. And this continued almost every single day for most of freshman year. But nobody knew about it. I kept it to myself because I felt like I had nobody to reach out to. I felt like I had nowhere to go.

When I finally realized that I needed help, I built up the courage to approach my best friend. She then helped me tell my mom. And from there, I received the proper help I needed. But I am lucky to have people in my life that support me in such a positive way. In all honesty, if my parents and best friend hadn't been so supportive, I probably wouldn't be standing here talking to you today. But what about the kids who don't have this support at home? Where do they go?

Unfortunately, the reality is that not all children are lucky enough to have available resources at home. That is why it is imperative that our schools become a safe place for students to talk about their mental health or else they will be left to deal with issues on their own.

As you have heard from the previous Project Strength Over Silence members, there are so many different solutions that you could implement that will help decrease the stigma around mental health and suicide awareness. We hope you take our suggestions into serious consideration. There is such a strong and negative connotation around the words SUICIDE and MENTAL ILLNESS that people don't reach out for help. And that needs to end *today*. We cannot let our fellow classmates, your children, keep hurting. We cannot let kids continue to *die* from something that is completely preventable. When we begin talking about mental wellness, we begin to see growth in the community. *We need to act NOW. We need to let children know that mental health is nothing to be ashamed of. We need to let them know that we are willing to help ... because "the pain ends when the silence stops."* Thank you.